BBR

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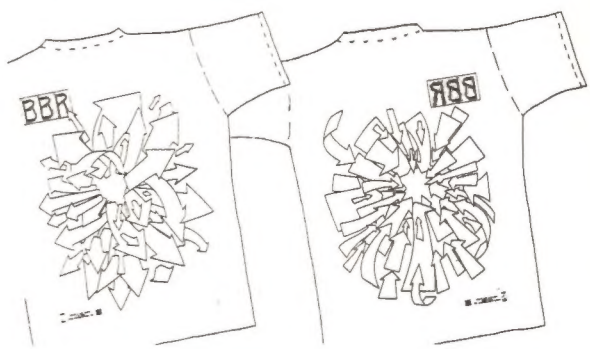

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BBR

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Mike O'Driscoll page 20
Wayne Allen Sallee page 28
Paul Di Filippo page 32
and more, plus BBR Review page 43

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This issue is illustrated by:

Catherine Buburuz (pp5-7)
Kevin Cullen (pp9-13,32-9)
Alfred Klosterman (p29)
Anne Stephens (p16-19)
Tim White (p3)
Smallpiece Whitmore (p25)

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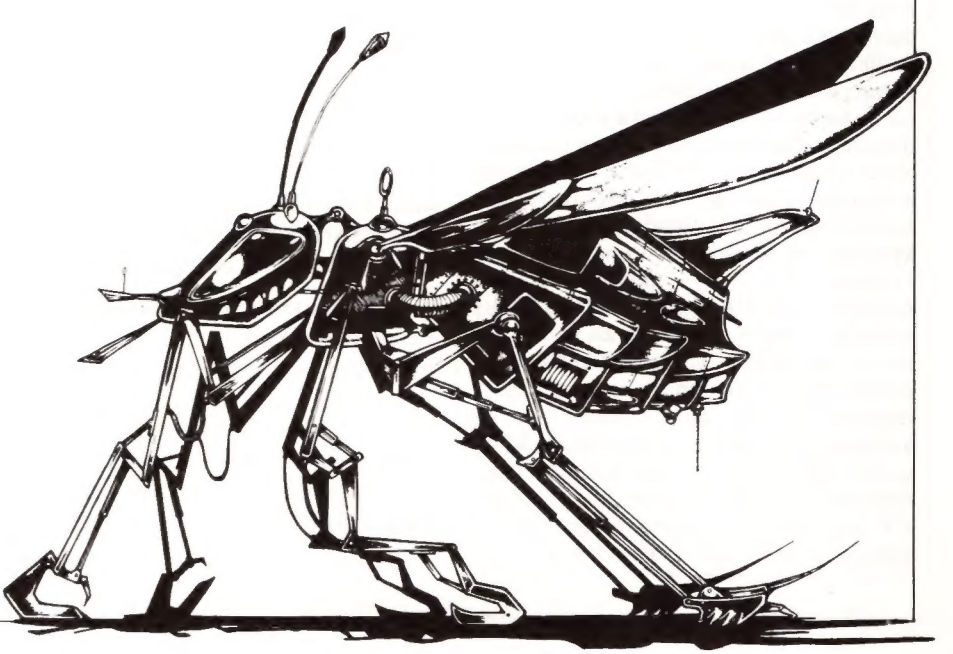

BACK BRAIN RECLUSE

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The Empire strikes back

Last issue's editorial, "A Free Market For SF?", created a strong and very positive reaction from readers. Instead of running another longer article, we have collected some of the more interesting comments to print as this issue's lead-off column. Our regular letters section on page 54 takes in more general discussion, with further reactions to the points raised specifically by John Duffield.

Meanwhile, we are pleased to start this column with a letter from David Pringle, editor of *Interzone*. Take it away, Dave!

From: **David Pringle, 124 Osborne Road, Brighton** *17 April 1990*

You invited me to respond to your editorial in **BBR** #15, so here are a few thoughts:

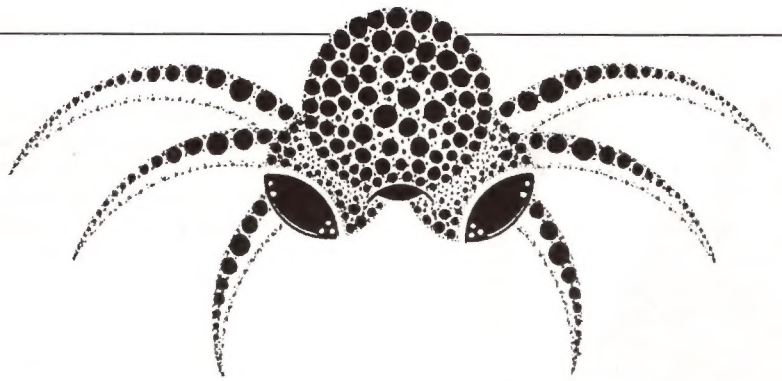
You say that *Interzone* has been "elevated by its monopoly of the market to the level of the establishment it once sought to sidestep." An interesting remark, but one which seems to me to make some wrong assumptions, as do many of the other statements in your article.

Firstly, your assumption that *Interzone* has a "monopoly of the market" – precisely what market do you mean, and in what sense do we monopolize it? Obviously, to claim that *IZ* has a monopoly of the English-language market for science-fiction magazines would be absurd – since such longstanding and commercially successful American magazines as *Analog*, *F & SF* and *Asimov's* all have much bigger portions of that market. So presumably you're talking about the British market only. (Yet we have always seen *IZ* against a wider background of English-language SF magazines in general, and have not thought of ourselves solely as a British magazine for British readers.) But even in terms of the British market alone, we've never had a complete monopoly: when we started out, in 1982, there was another British SF magazine in existence – *Extro*. It fell by the wayside, as did such later, one-shot efforts as *UK Omni* and *The Gate*. Latterly, we've had *Fear* as a competitor (even if many of us would claim that it's not *really* an SF magazine). And throughout *IZ*'s period of existence there have also been other, small-press, competitors in the SF/fantasy field – *Fantasy Tales* and *Dream* are just two I could name. And don't forget that the aforementioned American magazines also penetrate the UK market. So we've never had a literal monopoly. Moreover, *IZ* has never enjoyed the support of a publishing company:it has always been a small, independent magazine, with no secret financial backer and very little to spend on publicity and subscription drives. Hence our circulation has always been below 10,000 copies, and for most of our first six years it was as low as three or four thousand (although it's true our *print-run* once went as high as 14,000, that proved to be a wasteful and over-sanguine figure). Now that we've gone monthly we hope that the sales *will* rise beyond 10,000 – but we're not there yet. Just how a small magazine with a circulation such as ours can be regarded as "monopolizing" any national market (much less an international one) I fail to understand.

Secondly, your assumption that we "once sought to sidestep" the establishment. This is not the case, as far as I am concerned – we always wanted *IZ* to become a proper, professional and *established* science-fiction magazine. To that end, we published works by "name" writers from the outset; Angela Carter and J.G. Ballard were just two who appeared in our first couple of issues. We also published many new writers, and still do. Any professional SF magazine, however well founded, publishes a mix of established and new authors. To do otherwise is crazy. If you don't publish well-known authors you'll reach only a minuscule readership; and if don't continue to publish new authors at the same time you'll rapidly become stale and old-fashioned. Both are surely vital to the health of any SF magazine.

IZ's reputation for "sidestepping the establishment" is justified when you look at things from an international perspective. To many American readers we seem to be a particularly hard-hitting, radical and wayward magazine – well removed from mainline US SF. For them, we provide a refreshing contrast to the likes of *Analog*, or even *F & SF*. That's true largely because we're British-based. But in UK terms, we have in a sense always been part of the SF "establishment". Given that there have been so few successful British magazines, it's pointless for us to be otherwise. Essentially, there have only been American magazines for most readers to contrast us with.

Many of your later remarks in **BBR** #15 are based on an inflated estimate of *IZ*'s



commercial "success". As I've stated above, we're still small. We're not going monthly because we're some kind of runaway financial success. We are moving to the new schedule (a) because there's a lot of good material for us to publish, and (b) because we hope that the monthly schedule will in itself lead to greater sales and hence a more secure financial future for the magazine. The first 'duty' of any magazine – whatever its specific aims in publishing new writers or a particular kind of SF – is to *survive*, and to secure its own future. Unless it can continue to publish, and to deliver an audience to its writers, it will be of no use whatsoever to any authors (new or established) or to the SF genre as a whole. Going monthly is therefore part of the magazine's survival strategy, in broad terms – and not simply a reflection of recent commercial success (which has been minimal, alas).

I find it particularly galling when you say: "With no room for even the occasional 'adventurous' story as a potential taster for reader reaction, *IZ* are playing safe every time..." That's utter balls. We have plenty of room! Going monthly doubles the space! And virtually every issue contains at least one story (often two or three or four) which is in some sense adventurous – either unconventional in style, or iconoclastic in its subject matter, or in one way or another daring (or at least passionate) in its political or social "message". Certainly, some of the stories we publish may be described as decent entertainment and little more, but many others are ground-breaking pieces in one way or another. But I, as editor, shouldn't have to assert this: ask some of our regular readers, or take a look at the magazine's letter column.

Since I am making assertions, however, let me name some of the stories from the past half dozen issues of *IZ* which I think are 'adventurous' in some of the ways I have tried to indicate. They include: "Mosquito" by Richard Calder, "The Sculptor's Hand" by Nicholas Royle, "The New Jerusalem PLC" By Lee Montgomerie and "Listen" by Ian McDonald (all *IZ* 32); "The Panic Hand" by Jonathan Carroll and "The Eye of the Ayatollah" by Ian Watson (*IZ* 33); "Well-Loved" by Ian R. Macleod and "Memetic Drift" by Glenn Grant (*IZ* 34); "One-Way to Wap Wap" by Neil Ferguson (*IZ* 35); "The Original Dr Shade" by Kim Newman and "The Nexus" by Steven Widdowson (*IZ* 36); "A Lot of Mackerel, A Lot of Satellites" by Ian Lee, "The Mother" by Keith Brooke, "Yellow Snow" by Charles Stross and "Learning To Be Me" by Greg Egan (all *IZ* 37).

These are wide-ranging pieces, and obviously not all will be to every reader's taste, but, in their differing ways, I believe they are all heartfelt and even 'brave' works. We're proud to be publishing them. (And that's not to imply that all the *other* stories in those issues of *IZ* are just mindless pap – very far from it.)

You'll note that many of stories I've just named are by new or relatively new writers. While it's true that some of the newer writers we publish have graduated through small-press magazines (eg Keith Brooke and Glenn Grant), it's also true that others are our own direct discoveries (eg Richard Calder, Ian R. Macleod, Ian Lee). We continue to discover and to publish new writers regularly. *IZ* 34 consisted entirely of stories by recently emerged writers – seven of them – and yet you say we never take any risks!

I could go on, but your space is limited. Let me just conclude by saying that I do support what **BBR** and the better small-press magazines are trying to do. You provide alternative markets for beginning writers, and you have been responsible for nurturing a number of talents. *IZ* has done its bit to publicize magazines such as yours – in our Small Ads, in our editorial columns, and in our "Magazines Received". We shall continue to do so. We're not hostile to the small press, and we wish you the best of luck. Magazine publishing can be a tough and (dare I say?) competitive business. ❑

From: **John Peters, Devon**

I thought that the editorial made some very valid points – especially regarding book publisher's lack of experimentation with new writers. It seems to me that by bestowing insanely huge advances to best-selling writers (and to writers now living on their reputation, rather than their talents) for books which do not even have a synopsis written is an insanity itself. Surely this cuts the budget for acquiring new writers and developing their talents, and it also stunts SF's wings as they fall back on formula hackwork chopped into trilogies for marketing purposes.

The answer does seem to lay (partly, at least) in the small press dominion, and I have been continually amazed at the diversity both in content and style. I think that the small press 'counter-culture', for want of a term, is one of commitment – both in terms of material and quality of production. It's an area where you can start at a very basic level and work upwards, improving at a pace you set for yourself. If you are lucky, and others can see your commitment, you can get a lot of support and that also helps. I know because I've enjoyed that sort of help myself with *Flickers'n'Frames*, and it's helped turn a vaguely formed idea into something worth nurturing. We don't need overnight bestsellers – the readers who care will find us, and a word of mouth recommendation is better than all the hype that the Murdochs and Maxwells care to spend on their overpriced merchandise. ❑

From: **Dave W. Hughes, Huddersfield**

Your editorial really summed up what has needed to be said for a long time. The only thing I did disagree with, is where you mention the "one truly great magazine of the 90s". By definition of your editorial (ie. change and variety being the essential pointers towards choice) then there can never be "the first truly great magazine of the 1990s". Also, if people are made to realise that what they don't like isn't always crap, then this again just highlights that, for example, there may be *Dream* readers who don't like what goes on between the covers of **BBR**, making their 'true' magazine *Dream* and not **BBR** or *Works* or whatever.

I think what we do have, rather than

the one magazine, is a damn good choice and this is something that the British SF reader has never had before. Sorry to bring out the old clichés, but in many respects they've (or you've) never had it so good. What is happening is that standards – editorial, production, content and dedication – have increased over the last two or three years to such a level that at last, the indie magazines are starting to be recognised. ❑

From: Mike O'Driscoll, Swansea

While I agree with most of the sentiments expressed in your editorial – my own preference being for authors and fiction which is not contrained by the cage of genre SF, as in the list of authors quoted from Sterling and to which I'd add Richard Brautigan, Don Delillo and Thomas Pynchon – it seems that the great majority of SF readers do actually prefer their SF straight, as evidence by John Duffield's hysterical letter in #15, and by the continued success of Mssrs Asimov, Clarke, Heinlein, Hubbard et al.

And of course, to a certain extent, this is reflected in *Interzone*. As you point out, in attracting all the readers, it has over the years grown to reflect this consensus in its output, leading to the stage where a genuinely experimental piece is now the exception rather than the rule. But before this turns into another 'let's get *Interzone*' job, surely much of the fault lies with the readers themselves, many of whom (54% according to the recent *Interzone* poll) aspire to be writers. Why aren't they voicing their disapproval of the magazine's direction? Why aren't they writing more 'cutting edge' fiction? Maybe they are and maybe it just isn't being accepted, in which case, hopefully, these pieces – if they exist and if they're good enough – will find a home in places like **BBR**. Surely we're not all programmers and software engineers? (No, only 14% of us actually.)

For **BBR** and those magazines on the independent scene who wish to provide an alternative to the mainstream, it is not merely enough to state this in an editorial – it must be carried through to the rest of the magazine. Which means not accepting a piece by Moorcock or Ian Watson simply because of the name, but because of its merits. If it has none, then reject the bloody thing.

John Duffield did however make one good point in his letter: SF doesn't need to be grim and depressing and to have the message burdening the story – it can be entertaining and still have something to say without its message bludgeoning the reader over the head. Yeah, and I thought that was exactly what Mark Haw, David Riley, Garry Kilworth and David Hast did in #15 – entertained, amused, shocked and provoked. I'm thankful for it. ❑

From: Jim Steel, Strathclyde

Talk about hitting nails on the head! Okay, poor old *Interzone* is an easy target, but they do ask for it. I feel that their last readers poll sums up the problem that they are currently having. Somehow they seem to have attracted a readership that doesn't like SF. (Most of the people polled don't read any SF magazines other than *Interzone*.) When your readers put safe, cozy Brian Stableford top, and a story like "Chaos Surfari" at the bottom, then you know that you are doing something wrong. Still, I suppose it pays the rent. Don't know if I'll bother to resubscribe, though. ❑

From: Tony Tomkins, Salford

If I may liken SF to classical music to illustrate a point ... very few recordings of opera and symphony orchestras would be made by the record companies, but for the fact that the profits made from pop singles provide the cash that simply is not generated by sales of classical albums.

SF is in somewhat the same position: although it has a following, it is a minority one.

I note that in W.H. Smith's Manchester store, *Interzone* is placed in the 'Teenage Interest' section, something for the kids, not to be taken too seriously!

SF fans are a better market, I would imagine, although I am aware that there is a destructive element in SF fandom. Names are not needed, surely you will know who I mean, the highly self-opinionated idiots who seek to promote their own image at the expense of anybody who dares to contradict their opinions.

I always feel great disgust at the BNFs who proclaim that so-and-so's fiction is rubbish. In fact I rarely express an opinion about fiction other than to say that it is or is not to my taste. Would that others would do the same! ❑

From: Peter Tennant, Norfolk

Your editorial was stirring stuff that raised many points of interest. Like many people I've grown tired of genre material over the past decade. Whereas science fiction and fantasy used to account for nearly 100% of my reading it's now down to about a third.

Your editorial caught the tone of the times just right. Yes, it's depressing on the commercial front, with the emphasis on bestsellers and making money. Creatively though there are exciting opportunities. *Interzone* has gone monthly, and much as we bemoan its dubious quality this move can only be to the good. *Fear* also offers a market for aspiring authors of the unusual. Anthologies once more seem to be in the vogue. The creation of the NSFA seems to have galvanised the 'small press' scene, with people bouncing ideas off each other and a commitment to get bigger and better. On the horizon a whole new slew of magazines are coming up. I predict exciting things will happen, a field as wide, in opportunities for writer and reader alike, as our imagination will allow.

I will take issue with you on one point though. You say, after Bruce Sterling, "just because something is not to one's personal taste does not automatically mean that it is 'bad', merely that it might be 'different'." It seems to me that this statement is rather misguided. I don't believe the terms 'good' and 'bad' have any objective value with regard to literature (or maybe anything else for that matter). If I do not like a book then as far as I am concerned it is 'bad' (at least in part). That is what 'bad' means in this context, something not to my personal taste. I appreciate that someone else may find it 'good', but that's only their opinion. If you want to say that work should not be condemned out of hand simply because it is 'different', then I agree totally. Let's not though take our love of the unconventional to the point where we refuse to say something is 'bad' if it is 'different'. An attitude like that does no service to literature at all. ❑

From: **Chris Hart, Bolton**

Your appraisal of *Interzone*'s illusory success is an articulation of many people's feelings I would imagine. However, I agree with what you implied in the article, *Interzone* should not feel threatened by the NSFA, perhaps the competition will lift themselves out of their current stagnation. The rise in popularity and readership of the NSFA will mean that *Interzone* can do the things it wants to do, and target its aims more successfully. I don't see why it doesn't join the NSFA!

The NSFA seem to be working "the promotion of SF as serious (sic) fiction". I don't think this is particularly useful. The magazines that have a valuable *opinions* article have been concerned with the 'public image' and have tried to define their audience and role within SF. *The Edge* #2 offers a manifesto for 'White Heat SF'. **BBR** offers 'Underground SF' or 'Slipstream'. Perhaps this is merely a means of shaking off the subculture of 'SF Fans' – farties who go ape shit over tacky BBC space operas or space ships (or dare I say it – *Midnight Caller* – yuk!). The NSFA is becoming over conscious of this embarrassing image and shrugs it off as a product of the mass media. The way forward is not to compose manifestos – SF is too essentialist as it is, without prescribing new rules – but to thrive on the diversity of imagination and anticipate the New Age, draw upon the cultural anticipation of New Utopias, the new mystic perfectability. Relish in the iconography of the mass media. SF is a state of mind through which the universe and the human condition can be reworked through future mythologies, with complete freedom.

Well done Chris! Now, onward and upward! ❑

From: **Miles Hadfield, Southport**

I agreed with your editorial; loved the idea of Slipstream – but Christ, who finds these names?

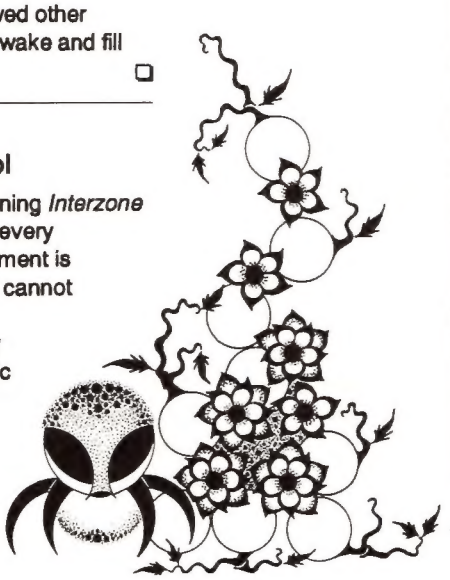
I'd much rather read a magazine of that type of fiction – wide ranging, breaking down the ghetto walls – than a genre magazine. I'd rather the future – even if also the nemesis – of SF lay here than in all this Technogoth stuff *Interzone* have been burbling on about (and frankly, if Charles Stross is, as *Interzone* implied, the future of SF, then I'm going). ❑

From: **Mike Adkisson, editor *New Pathways*, Texas**

You may have been a little too hard on *Interzone* in your recent editorial – not that I don't sympathize, since I'm also one of the 'little guys'. However, you should see the crap we're seeing in the States. The established SF magazines in the USA are simply, absolutely crap! I know that *Interzone* has become a little stale, but compared with US magazines it shines! You Britishers should feel proud to have such a magazine. And it has allowed other magazines to come in the wake and fill up the missing gap. ❑

From: **Paul Pinn, Bristol**

Your comments concerning *Interzone* were interesting (it seems every magazine I read at the moment is having a go at them) and I cannot help but agree with them. The folk at *Interzone* really could do with some lysergic in their tea. And now they're going monthly ... God help us! ❑



Change of address

Please note **BBR**'s new editorial address:

BBR, Chris Reed, PO Box 625, Sheffield, S1 3GY, UK

Readers are asked to use this address from now on for all correspondence relating to **BBR** magazine and to the New SF Alliance in general. ❑

Nightfall sees the light of day

Of the five new magazines we featured last issue, only one has so far gone into regular production. Our congratulations and best wishes therefore go to Noel Hannan, editor of *Nightfall* magazine, whose first issue appeared in May with the second out at the beginning of August. Sample copies cost £1/$4 from Noel at 18 Lansdowne Road, Sydney, Crewe CW1 1JY, UK.

Of the other forthcoming publications, these troubled times have caused Andrew Coates to give up completely on his magazine *Psyko Candy*, whilst Arthur Straker's *REM* has been forced to reschedule for late August release.

On the brighter side, *The Gate* has finally produced its second issue, whilst two more new magazines have been brought to our attention:

MEMES: #2 A5, 40pp, £1:25 from Norman Jope, Flat 10, Sinclair Court, Park Road, Moseley, Birmingham B13 8AH

XENOS: #1 A5, 52pp, £2 from Stephen Copestake, 65 Abbott Crescent, Kempston, Bedford MK42 7QJ.

If you're interested in contributing or subscribing, then send them an SAE or 2 IRCs for more information. ❑

BBR on tour

BBR will be attending the following conventions, and manning a stall with other NSFA editors and contributors. Any readers who care to drop by for a chat and a few beers will be very welcome.

1990:

14–16 September: FantasyCon XV, Midland Hotel, Birmingham.
9–11 November: Novacon 20, Excelsior Hotel, Birmingham.

1991:

29 March – 1 April : Speculation (42nd British SF Convention), Hospitality Inn, Glasgow.
24–26 May: Mexicon 4, The Old Swan Hotel, Harrogate.
8–14 September: Volgacon, Volgograd, USSR.
27–30 September: Albacon '91, Central Hotel, Glasgow.

1992:

17–20 April: Illumination (43rd British SF Convention), Norbreck Castle Hotel, Blackpool.

All details courtesy of *Critical Wave* – see their latest issue for contact addresses, registration fees and other relevant information (£1:50 from 24A Beech Road, Bowes Park, London N11 2DA). ❑

TIM NICKELS

COLDER STILL

The world was white.

In these higher latitudes, Winter came easily. Winter came like an old friend. Blizzards rushed across the earth like frenzied polar bears scattering their pure white fragments. The earth was frozen to a point twenty metres below its surface: the surface sang and vibrated when men tried to break into it.

The mountainman came down to the village in the whiteness. He slunk naked among the houses in the pallid dawn-light. His body was ice-bitten and as hard as the singing earth. The entire being spoke of brutishness.

The beast skulked on the outskirts for two days; his speech gibberish, his movements pathetic. Folk threw cauliflower cores and doused the already stinking hide of the creature with sour beer. He tried to perform handstands but collapsed in the gutter. Schoolboys running home paused to kick the mountainman, egged on by obnoxious younger sisters.

On the evening of the second day, he found Moraya's hayloft. The creature lay among the warm animal smells and slept at last.

There was a terrific snowstorm that night. On the third morning, the ground glistened under a metre of snow. Low clouds lit up under the glare from the land beneath them.

Moraya forced the backdoor open and slipped on her snow shoes. Her two sisters slept in the kitchen behind her: they were both eighty-three years old and too ill to make the stairs anymore. Moraya turned and smiled at them through the sleeping fug. The smell of fresh bread and diktimus pervaded the house.

She struck out across the snow-drifted farmyard, slitting her eyes in the sub-zero air. Her goat was with kid and the time was very soon. She checked twice daily, cooing to her beast and washing its flanks with straw. It was Moraya's goat: it was Moraya's hayloft; no one else went there.

She unbolted the door and fell inside on a rush of snow.

The mountainman was awake. He crouched in the corner and gave off a melodious humming groan. Moraya's nanny had given birth during the night's blizzard and licked and chewed the umbilical of her new kid. The baby leant against the mountainman, its chin nestled happily over the massive thigh.

The two sisters were awake when Moraya returned. They fussed around the stove together like an old marriage. They gabbled in the old language of the district: the tongue used before the pan-edict issued by the Central Committee.

Thay all sat down at the big kitchen table, prayed and broke bread into the goat's milk that Moraya had taken from her loft. Moraya studied her two sisters as she did every morning: as she had done every morning for seventy-five years. They were called Romanz and Konstantina. Age had turned them into huddled, shrunken men.

The goat and its kid were discussed. There was a brief mention of star positions and the possibility of selling the kid to the local necromancer. Moraya did not mention the mountainman. Why should she? Such things did not exist.

She had heard reports of a creature entering the village a couple of days previously but had discounted them. She rarely went beyond her own farmyard these days, relying on Demitri and others for local news. The reports had told of the boys and their kicking. When she was a child, such an event would have been greeted with tears of joy. The priest would have been brought forth and ikons paraded in their glass cabinets. A week of festivities. But of course there were no such things. Why, hadn't the Central Committee denied the existence of the mountainmen? Weren't they just the decadent whimsy of a former regime?

She cleared the breakfast things and settled Romanz down in the front room and helped Konstantina into her dark little cubby hole where she kept her loom. Moraya fretted for half an hour among her sisters, pretending to do little housebound things. She then threw on her snow-shoes and stamped out to the hayloft.

Snippets of snow-light filtered through chinks into the interior. Tiny husk fragments floated in and out of the light shafts. The mountainman stood in a corner, his body tall and reeking. His

eyes were closed but the throat vibrated and hummed rhythmically like a sawing heartbeat. The goat and her kid lay contentedly at the creature's feet. Moraya stepped forward, trying not to make her snow-shoes slap too loudly on the flagstones. There was something else in the shadows; another creature that nuzzled at the mountainman's legs.

Another kid ...

It peered up at her and bleated then went back to sleep, snug in the hairy feet.

Two kids at one birth was an occurrence unknown in the village for many years. Goats had been specially bred along lines laid down by the Agricultural Sub-Committee. One kid per birth was deemed sufficient. This was good policy: a policy directly relative to the decreased human population and the systematic defoliation of grazing land.

Moraya stared down at the baby goat. Why had she not noticed it before? It looked perfectly normal. She loved new life, perhaps because circumstances had denied her the chance to bring forth children herself. The years had charged by her like a mountain river at Springtime. Years of drought and occupation: of loneliness and scorched earth.

She left the hayloft quickly.

The ante-room smelt of old wood and honey. Wall hooks held a row of dark gowns.

"Do you love Crystos? He who died for you. Do you love Him?"

The priest leaned close to Moraya, his comfortable breath brushing her cheek: "My child, life is strange by its very nature. Every day is a miracle. A discovery. Our lives are so short, our flesh is so weak."

He gestured to the entrance of the Mayor's family crypt in a far corner. The bright Byzantine colours etched out a death's head above the litter of crosses.

"But, my father – I cannot keep this thing to myself. It is a miracle. In my childhood – oh, you are so much younger than me ... You will never know."

The priest stood up and smiled. He was a kind man caught between sides.

"There is something we all must know, Moraya. Love God and keep our mouths shut."

The mountainman had gone when she came back. Huge untidy footprints curved off across the deeper snow and down the cart track that led to the village.

There were two Trenake trees by her farm gate. They both grew slender, dripping icicles that flashed in the warming air of mid-morning. Moraya touched the trees with only mild surprise, then rolled her arms around one fully. The sap poured across her face, diluting the tears.

"You will never know, my father," she whispered. "You will never know."

She hugged the new tree tighter.

She met Demitri coming up the cart track, clearing it as he went. The old man had seen army service on the Crimson Lakes but the only decoration he had received was an ugly blanche down one side of his face. He grinned and the deformity rose up like a nightmare.

"Seen, Dolly gal?" He spoke in the old dialect and jerked a thumb down the track behind him. Dolly was Demitri's pride and hope in his old age: a beautiful Arabian mare. He kept her on a piece of waste ground by his shack on the banks

of the river: Demitri netted there for Winter sturgeon and hung them on lines to smoke. Dolly was Demitri's foible, a ridiculous dream: a miracle in itself. Dolly trotted up the track now.

Two Dollys.

One followed the other, each careful of its footing on the treacherous surface.

"Did y'see the Mountainman, Moraya? Did y'see 'im? Ha, beautiful. It was a beautiful thing. He touched her. He just touched her. And just look at Dolly ..."

Moraya broke into a giddy half-run, passing by the old man and his two horses.

History was happening. Not just a reoccurrence of events or legends past: but a history all of its own. Folk would talk about this. The father's flesh and that of his flock would wither: the Committee would fade away: and yet the story of this day would be etched into the memory of mankind like the glacier scouring the mountain.

The village square was crowded. The snow was brown and scummy. It was market day and farmers from the surrounding countryside strolled about and shouted at each other. They were hideous men: their hearts as frozen as the land in Winter. Their faces were raw and red and they might have bartered their wives and children away if need be.

The mountainman stood in a flood of white cockerels. Two women had fainted and lay now sprawled in the slush. The birds pecked at their headscarves with curiosity. Schoolboys, let out for the day, laughed and pointed. They were doubtlessly the creature's former tormentors but had turned with the frailty of childhood.

The mountainman stroked and hummed at a cockerel and from beneath his great smelly paw another would float out – an exact, noisy, pecking duplicate. Birds were everywhere. Old men chased after them crazily. The Mayor crawled laughingly among them, his robes streaked with excrement and dirty snow.

"Herculo! Herculo!" They cried, plucking a hero's name from legend and bestowing it upon the mountainman.

The mountainman laughed too. He roared. His chest rose up and down and his bellows echoed across the village and up into the mountains beyond.

It had come like a miracle and Moraya's tears kept flooding down her cheeks, spilling onto her smock, soaking through onto the old skin beneath.

But her heart was dry and her heart was warm. And she believed.

Spring: and the land was loud with the rushing of water. High in the mountains, tiny blue flowers peppered the receding snowline. The valley was full of birds.

Manolis was the first to ride in with news of the War. He was a relation of Demitri and kept sheep on a low range of hills ten kilometres away. A band of Romanes had camped next to him and had whispered of border incursions; of treaties made and broken.

The news was taken by the village with an air of resignation: an acceptance born out of experience. The mountains marked the natural border between their own country and its neighbour and the land had changed hands ten times in as many decades. Some prepared half-heartedly for departure: others, even more half-heartedly, checked antique flintlocks and continued on their daily round.

Travellers passed by but could say no more than Manolis. Soldiers of their own country rode through with heavy horses trailing small field-pieces. The soldiers didn't even stop long enough to steal their food; to whisper to women and children of the glorious battle to come.

Perhaps the village would be lucky this time.

Herculo the mountainman continued to live in Moraya's hayloft. He had been persuaded to bathe in the river next to Demitri's smoking-shack. He wore a linen nappy during daylight hours but removed it at night in a curiously human gesture. Moraya often had to chase away young girls from the chinks in her loft.

There were twice as many piglets that spring. Twin lambs gamboled in their drystone corrals. Life glowed everywhere. Herculo lumbered with an odd grace through a light mist of mayflies and the mist became a dense fog.

"Herculo, why can't you talk?" asked Moraya to her creature. They sat by the river one fine Spring afternoon.

The creature just looked at her with its yellow eyes. The shaggy brows wrinkled, almost in thought – almost as if he was seriously pondering the question. He reached out and touched her. The huge fingernail traced the line of her seamed old mouth; touched both of her lips.

"Two," he said.

A week later, they came for Sticks the necromancer.

It had emerged that the field gun detachment that rode so hurriedly through the village had been brutally ambushed in a nearby mountain pass. The work of a fifth column had been intimated: no one knew why the necromancer was suspected of spying.

Three military policemen cantered up the valley with a warrant for his arrest bearing the seal of the Defence Sub-Committee. They carried flintlock carbines and the oldest of them was nineteen years old.

Everyone was frightened of Sticks. Even the priest kept his distance. The necromancer lived mysteriously in a nearby copse, discovering portents in shallow pools and copulating with the daughters of terrified farmers. The necromancer scowled and cackled. He leered and displayed himself.

Sticks leered and cackled now as the policemen helped him up onto a fourth horse. He was a small man like a monkey and he smirked at the gathering crowd through painted green teeth.

A heavy silence fell across the square. A solitary stork rose up from a nearby chimney pot and flew away to the East. The necromancer glanced up, giggled, and slit the throat of his youngest captor.

He withdrew a long poisoned fingernail from the hapless youth's neck and was off the horse before his victim's head had hit the cobblestones. Sticks shrieked wildly and was on the other two before they had time to prime their carbines.

There were screams and movement in the crowd. The necromancer would slay them all! Would kill every father and son; would rip and darken every maidenhead with his shadow ...

A precise movement slipped through the panic and a huge hairyness whipped out at Sticks. Again the paw of Herculo the mountainman shot out. Again and again.

And with every brush of Herculo's paw the fingers of the necromancer gained a poisoned nail. Sticks's hand flailed out like a broken fan, trying to

shake the death away. But the nails grew and curled, dripping a black alkali venom. In his madness, the necromancer's hand clenched in anger and a spasm shot through the wrinkled simian body. He cried out: crawled on the ground; threw himself at the crowd. Blood and poison flowed from him. He wrenched an axe from a speechless farmer and clumsily tried to amputate the poisoned hand with partial success. But like a scorpion in a ring of fire, Sticks was too late and he collapsed onto the cobbles, his back arching in a final dreadful spasm.

The crowd gasped. They turned as one but Herculo had gone.

She asked: "Why do you kill?"

Moraya and Herculo sat together in the kitchen. Her two sisters snored in their separate corners.

The mountainman spoke in an odd fashion: the words were thick and deliberate.

"He was dead in heart."

"The necromancer was a hated man. The people love you for what you did."

Herculo was silent, looking out into the night.

"They want to see you. They want to be with you. You have touched people's lives: do you know how many people's lives you have touched?"

The creature gave a grunting sigh. He gently took her hand and pressed it against his barrel-hollow chest: he placed his own paw, gently and without embarrassment, against her slumped unsuckled breast.

"Two."

Summer tempered Spring's rush of water: it stilled the torrent to a trickle among the roasting stones of the riverbed. The late-flowering Trenakes brought forth a creamy yellow blossom that rose and fell on swaying boughs: rose and then blew away like a thick, sweet rain.

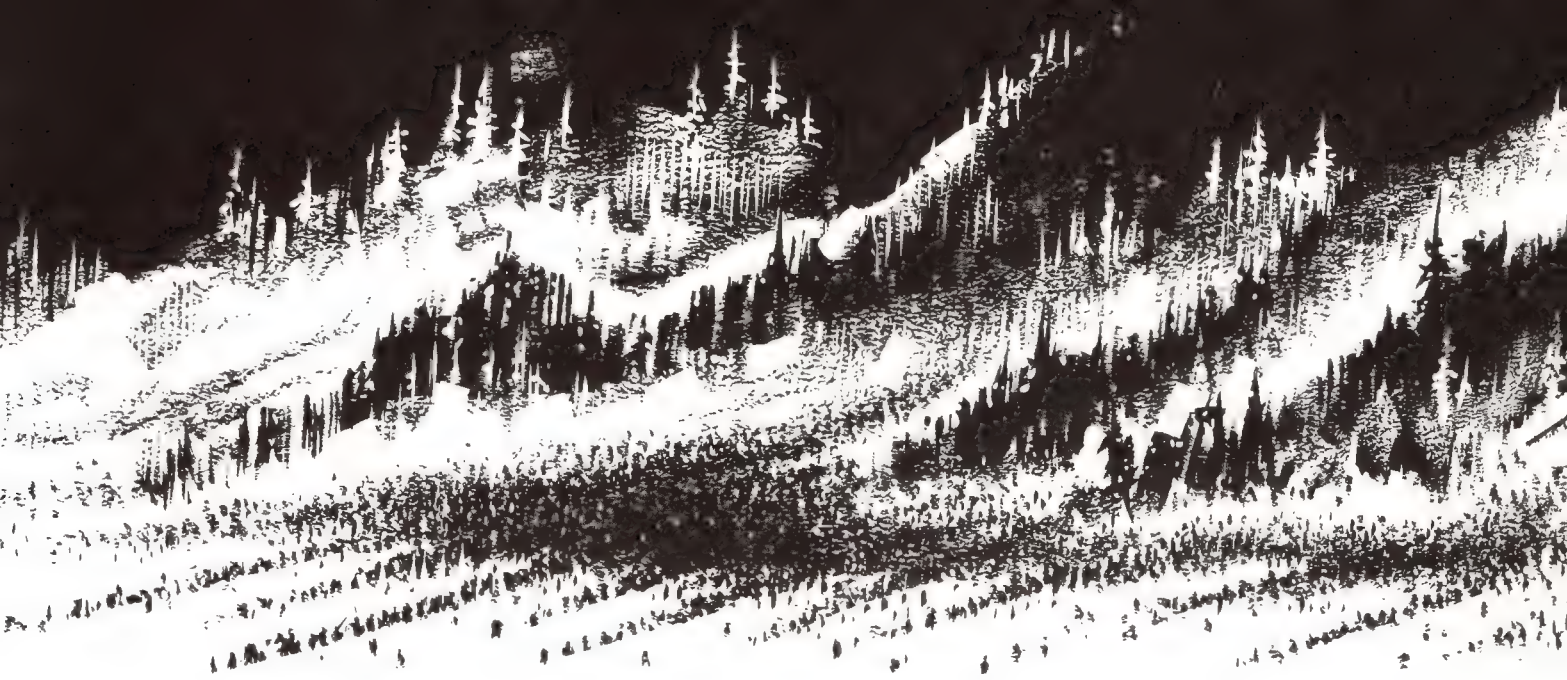
News of the War was sparse. Three month old Committee broadsheets were circulated, vigorously defending the nation's stance as protectors of Civilisation. Victories had been glorious and the few defeats had been orchestrated by traitors and mental patients. The broadsheet exorted the nation to seek out its turncoats and punish them in the traditional way. The article was graphically illustrated for the illiterate majority of the population.

The mountainman continued to be popular in the village. The church was able to step up its continuous re-building plan: Herculo could carry the riverbed stones unaided and rigged the wooden scaffolding with ease. He laid out a new drystone wall for the cemetery at the highest point in the village: the nearest point to God. Children ran around him, laughing as he worked. Herculo looked at the graves: some of them had portraits of their occupants hung over the crosses, rendered in paint or by the new photographic process. The faces were solemn, yet held an inner joyous glow.

The mountainman touched the pictures but nothing happened. The faces were those of the dead.

The Trenakes had lost their blossom and their leaves lay thick when Romanz died.

The funeral processed around the square and along the main street that led up to the cemetery. It passed through a gap in the new wall: the air was thick with the scent of herbs warmed by departing Summer. There were many tears for Romanz: she had been one of the oldest people in the village and a Godmother to most of the mourners. But their tears were of joy for a life well spent, for



a death that came quietly and with dignity.

Herculo stood a little to one side of the coffin, its open half-lid revealing the still sleeping face, the coin-covered eyes. He came closer, gently shouldering away the weeping mourners. Herculo held out his paw and lowered it towards Romanz's sleeping lips.

"No."

The young priest looked at the creature without moving.

"No," he repeated. "Her time has come, my friend. She has been called." He motioned to the new wall. "You have built well. Be content."

Herculo left the group, passed through his new gateway and strode slowly down to the river. Moraya watched the creature go but presently turned back and whispered to her sleeping sister.

Manolis collapsed in the new snow, gasping. The flakes caught on his hair and froze. He had run all night and had left his flock in a cave hidden deep in the mountains. He lay now on the wasteground outside Demitri's hut, surrounded by concerned villagers.

"The War," he gasped. "The War is coming –"

They helped him into the hut where Demitri rubbed his nephew down and poured hot lard down his throat. Manolis had met his Romanes on the mountainside but they had been in disarray. Their traditional Summer grazing grounds had been overrun by enemy troopers possessing non-muzzle loading carbines with paper cartridges. Their rate of fire made the weapons formidable. The broadsheets provided by the Central Committee had made no mention of this development – perhaps because its own army had mutineed in the shortening days of late Summer: or so the Romanes said. However exaggerated the reports, it was obvious that the enemy had the upper hand. And the village lay at the bottom of the pass that had provided the easiest invasion route for many centuries.

There were contemptuous and familiar grunts from many. Hadn't the village lived through invasion before? Let the enemy come. They would bend with the winds of change as they had always done. But others were not so sure. The advent of this new and unknown technology might change everything. There was something diabolical in this strange harbouring of wind and fire. Words were whispered: there were many who began to think that the Dark One led the enemy army.

Brave souls journeyed up the mountain with bags of rock salt to scatter around the lonely grave of Sticks the necromancer: to stop his heretic's ghost from rising in the hours of night to aid the invaders.

Winter.

The old friend. The freezer of the earth. The bright one that killed the young and the unwary. It was not a season that engendered hope: before the warmth returned, the world would become colder still.

Moraya stood in the dark kitchen looking out at the night. Konstantina sat upright in a chair dozing: her breathing was rapid and shallow. Moraya watched her remaining sister in the reflection of the dark window. Konstantina looked like a ghost.

No one had seen Herculo since the funeral. There was little concern: folk seemed to be too caught up in their own serious or semi-serious attempts at stemming off the enemy invaders. Reports regarding the enemy's position differed: various sources reported that disaster lay either hours, days or weeks away. No matter: the crisis would come.

Moraya stared hard out into the night, trying to focus beyond the reflections in the dark glass. Perhaps she could just see a whisper of a Trenake tree. Herculo's Trenake tree.

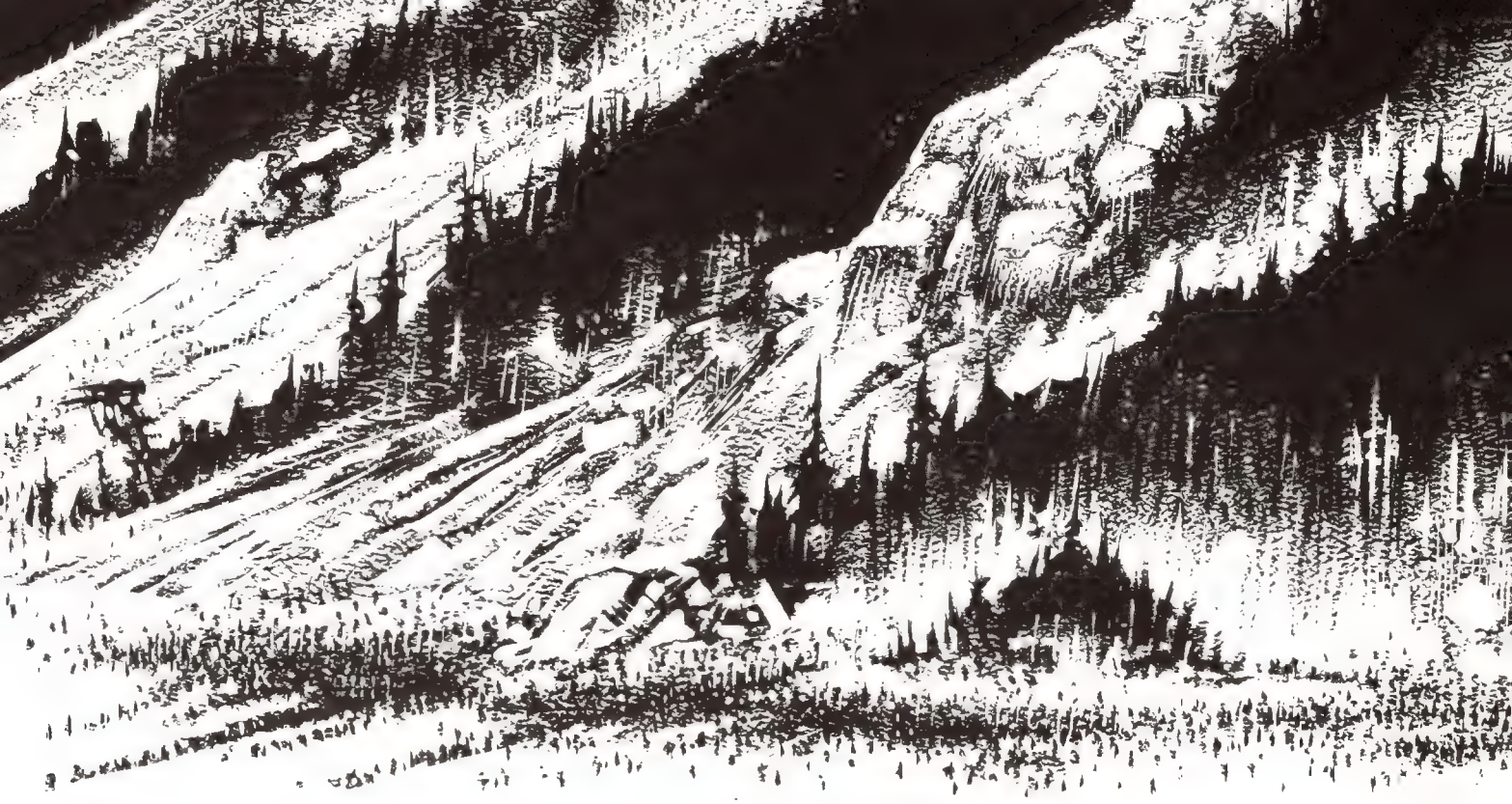
The snow was falling thickly, muffling the farmyard and turning sharp outlines into vague, white impressions. Sounds petered through the gloom, lilting on the borders of perception. A crowded whisper of voices: the priest was leading a midnight mass in the church a little lower down the hill. His beautiful warbling voice came more clearly now, answered by a hushed kyrie eleison.

The voices seemed to fill the air, to become thicker even than the snow. She tried to peer even further into the darkness but the land had become invisible.

The invaders came during the night.

The snowfall ceased just before dawn and long shadows moved across the rooftops. Soldiers flitted between the mountain ramparts above the village, circling down the icy stream beds that led to the cobbled outskirts. People came drowsily from their houses: many had slept in the church. The Mayor tried to fasten his collar in the reflection of a frozen gutter but with little success.

The first troopers crept into the village even though they knew their presence



had been detected. There were only perhaps a score of them: lean, weather-beaten men with bad teeth. They took it in turns to break down doors and loot food whilst their fellows kept guard around them. They slipped from house to house like nervous birds.

Yet they were not alone: these first soldiers were merely the pathfinders, the harbingers. More silhouettes appeared on the skyline; and more still as the valley began to echo with cries and the jangle of equipment.

Presently, an impossible sea began to slip down the mountainside: a murmuring human ocean of green and mauve. Horses, carts and howitzer carriages followed. Wooden wheels groaned and split on the frozen trails as gaunt women scampered after wagons festooned with cooking pots. A squadron of their priests rode on the backs of camels, reciting diabolical liturgies from beneath their orange cowls. The army was massive, like some mobile piece of epic landscape. A vacuum seemed to linger in its wake as if a million pairs of lungs, human and animal, had breathed in as one.

The ocean reached the village outskirts and then halted.

Rumour had scurried ahead of the army. It said that this was the greatest force ever assembled. Merceneries from a dozen countries had rallied to its banner. Reports told of distant great powers using the War as an opportunity to test their experimental weapons for more serious conflicts to come. The scene was redolent of destiny; of a powerful memory blasted backwards from the future.

A small man detached himself from a rear column and calmly wheeled a small cart into the village. He stopped near the square, adjusted his rakish blue beret and began to set up a bulky box camera in the snow. Village boys came forward warily and then more confidently as the photographer beckoned them on with enthusiasm. More soldiers approached, slinging their infamous new carbines. They smiled, fumbling for sweets in their tunic pockets. Hands were shaken and toffees distributed. Soldiers hitched young children up onto their shoulders and grinned oafishly at the unlying camera.

Older villagers held back. The smiling soldiers did not concur with their past experience. Most of the civilians remained huddled in the square. Moraya looked at the young priest. His mouth was set, his eyes darting as if trying to look into the soul of every single soldier in the valley.

The photographer finished his work, putting the used plates into a black hatbox. He steered his little cart back to the ranks of troopers. He turned once to smile at the children and then continued on his way.

The Mayor was still wrestling with his collar when the first shot hit him. His knees folded and he fell almost to attention. A cage of chickens exploded. One of the first pathfinders lobbed another smoking grenade and the old war memorial fragmented: chunks of masonry blew out like horizontal rain. There were more carbine shots. Manolis grasped his arm, swore, and staggered towards the great army yelling incoherently: a burst of fire left him in pieces.

The air was full of screams and the smell of gunpowder. The village folk had unconsciously been corralled into their own village square. Soldiers were on all sides, their ugly faces pale against the black smoke. Mothers fell onto their children. Grandmothers tried to shield them all with their black skirts of mourning.

Moraya crawled to the Mayor and tried to turn his face around. He was quite dead. The priest was there too. His formerly darting eyes darted still – yet the reason seemed to have left them. He was saying something and Moraya strained to hear above the chaos.

A grenade full of grapeshot blew off the church door and she covered her face, curling up into a ball. The cobbles were covered in blood, snow and chicken feathers.

There was a sudden clatter and an unshod horse's hoof brushed her ear painfully. It was Demitri's prize Arab, Dolly: she galloped around the square, eyes wide and bellowing like a human being. She ran like a beast from hell. Her twin – Herculo's gift – cantered behind. Moraya watched the progress of the two

horses as they left the massacre in the village square and galloped on up the track that led to the hilltop cemetery.

Moraya rose to her knees and looked up at the hill. A huge figure cavorted among the crypts and grave stones. A familiar figure.

A great weight slammed against her arm. She gasped, trying to breath air back into her body. Her lungs seemed to have shrunk and they didn't work properly: her mouth was full of a sudden, sweet warmth.

She forced her eyelids open. The horses had reached the cemetery now and stood panting by the wall. The figure leaned over and nuzzled them. Moraya tried hard to think what Herculo might be saying but the effort was too great. The mountainman turned away from the animals and continued with his work. Even from this distance, Moraya could see that Herculo was passing among the graves digging and touching and humming as he did so.

The distance clouded: a very light snow began to fall like little pieces of Heaven.

She felt her whole body shudder and realised that death was only moments away. And not only her own. Moraya realised with a gasp that she had barely survived to see a day that she had never thought possible. For Herculo was the bringer of life: the bright cutter of darkness. The invaders would never take the village now. They had come by night but would never see another.

Herculo danced through the graveyard; and where he danced the army of the dead rose up. ❑

This story marks a welcome return to **BBR** for Tim Nickels, who last graced our pages in #10 with "The Cathode Waltz". A Devonian born and bred, Tim runs a hotel in Salcombe, but escapes to the heartland of Spain when he gets the chance.

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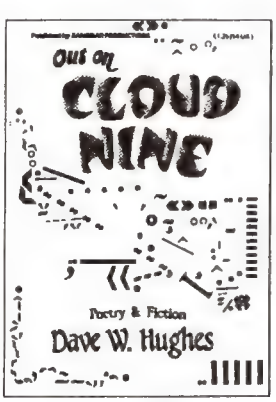

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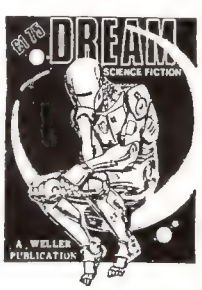

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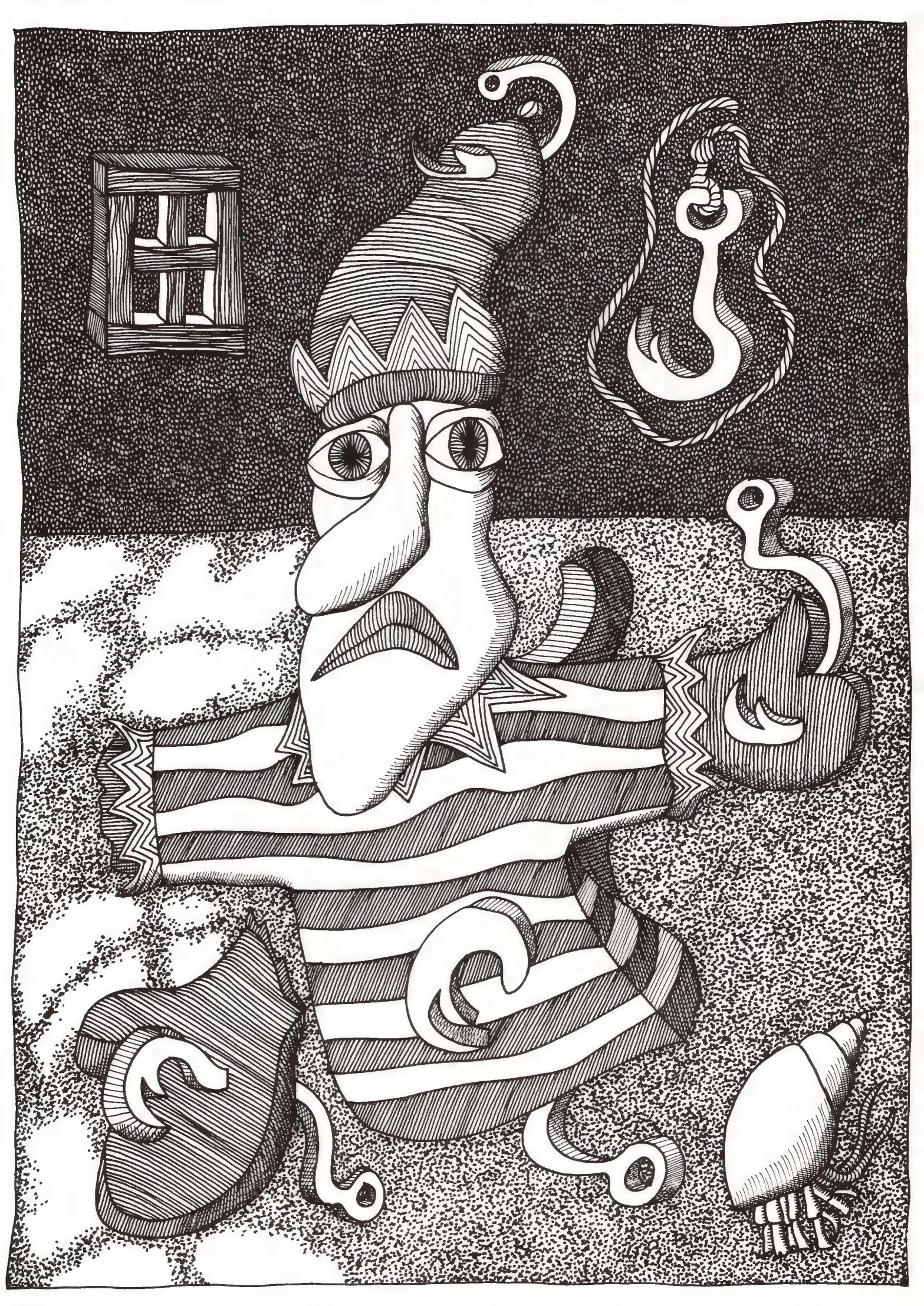


DON WEBB

BEACH SCENE

Characters:

BILL: A sunburned, windburned man in his later sixties wearing shorts, shirt, and 'gimme' cap.

BOB: A crony of Bill's.

Scene:

Bright September day at Crystal Beach, Texas. Sounds of gull cries, crashing surf, etc should be played throughout. 'Fishing' is done in pantomime, but the creels are real. Bob should stand closer to the audience than Bill.

BILL: Pretty cold today. Cold wind off the land.

BOB: Yeah. If nothing bites I'm heading back to the cabin get a little fire going. Maybe rent a movie.

BILL: If you put a whole shrimp on your hook you'd get bites.

BOB: No. It just gets nibbled off. Besides I don't see you gettin' any bites.

BILL: It's the weather.

BOB: Yesterday it was the shrimp boats.

BILL: Well it just goes to prove it's always something.

BOB: That's profound. What is that, zen?

BILL: I'm too cold to be profound.

BOB: Shouldn'ta worn shorts. Shorts aren't for old men like us.

BILL: Speak for yourself.

BOB: You're the one who's cold. Aren't your kids coming this weekend?

BILL: (*Slowly*) Well.

BOB: Well?

BILL: Well I don't think so. Sharon's going on about how busy she is at work and what's-his-name – Ralph's got the flu. He always gets something when they're supposed to come down and that puts a stop to it.

BOB: He don't like small towns.

BILL: Well he can always take the ferry across to Galveston. He don't have to stay the whole weekend. He could run around in Houston.

BOB: Sharon always does the driving. I think something's not right with him.

BILL: Well he's better than the first one.

BOB: I never met the first one.

(*Pause*)

BILL: Damn gulls don't seem to have any trouble catching fish.

BOB: They spent millions of years evolving into a perfect fish-catching shape.

BILL: Don't tell me you buy that evolution con.

BOB: Yep. The world's been around for billions of years aiming for just this moment. You and me retired and fishing.

(*Pause*)

BILL: Did you see the meteor last night?

BOB: No.

BILL: Big and green. I think it struck the ocean. There was thunder afterward.

(*Short pause*)

BOB: Maybe that's why the fishing's off.

BILL: No. It think it's oil prices.

BOB: Oil?

BILL: Yeah. Since oil is down they're not working the rigs. When the rigs went in fishing got better.

BOB: That's because the rigs are platforms for barnacles and so forth. The barnacles aren't out of work.

(*Pause*)

BILL: The wind's really got an edge to it.

BOB: Go home and put some pants on.

BILL: Well.

BOB: Bill, are you and Mildred having trouble?

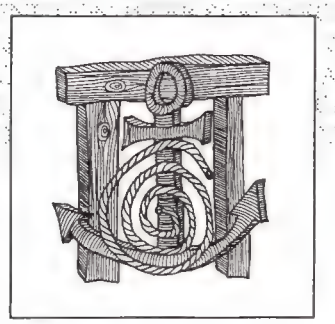
BILL: (*Slowly, painfully*) No. Well. No.

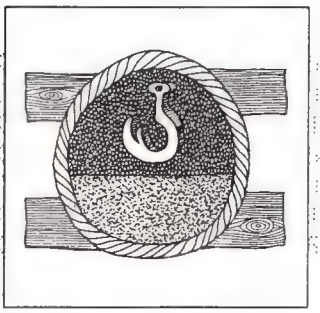
BOB: Well? You can tell me.

BILL: I had a dream last night.

BOB: Yeah you dreamed up a meteor.

BILL: No. This was after the meteor. I dreamt that I (*with sick fascination*) killed Mildred. With an axe, the big red fire axe I keep in the garage. I snuck up on her in the kitchen and swung and swung and opened up her head. And she fell and tried to gather the brain bits –





they were sponges – back into her skull. And I pushed them behind the refrigerator. And she couldn't get to them. And she twitched and twitched like a bug. Then she died.

BOB: You've been renting too many movies.

BILL: This was real, man. It was so real that when I woke up I didn't know if it was a dream. So I got dressed and came down here.

BOB: Did you pinch yourself to see if you were dreaming?

BILL: Jesus Christ. (*Sotto voice*) Did you pinch yourself to see if you were dreaming? (*Normal voice*) That's what Mildred always says. Even if she's awake. Last week I suggested we – suggested we get frisky and she pinches her arm and says, "Well I guess I ain't dreaming." That killed it for me right then.

BOB: Well you must've known it was a dream when you saw Mildred.

BILL: Well, Bob, I don't sleep with Mildred anymore.

(*Long pause*)

BILL: I sleep downstairs in the guest bedroom.

BOB: It still don't matter. It was just a dream.

BILL: But I liked it. I enjoyed the heft of the axe, the red strokes, her pain and cries.

BOB: We all have dreams like that.

BILL: No.

(*Short pause*)

Not like this.

(*Short pause*)

I really found myself.

BOB: You really need to go home and have lunch with Mildred.

BILL: I won't. I'm too old for the pretense. Maybe later.

BOB: (*Confused*) What pretense?

BILL: I've become someone else. I'll have to keep pretending to be me. Pretending to fish with you, pretending to buy milk from that Bengali girl at Thom's General, pretending to be a volunteer fireman.

BOB: You're guilty because of a dream?

BILL: No. It's tiring because of the pretense.

BOB: What will you really be doing?

BILL: Hiding. That's what a murderer does, hides. I've read a lot of those used mysteries Mildred buys at the flea market.

BOB: But you're sure you didn't kill her?

BILL: Pretty sure. I mean someone can't die like that loosing their brain and trying to stuff it back in. Biology's not like that.

BOB: You've got to go back sometime. At least to take your heart medicine.

BILL: When I'm stronger. Better at pretending. I'm practicing with you, Bob. You don't think I'm a killer do you, Bob?

BOB: No.

(*Pause*)

BOB: I still think you should go back. *I'm* going back in a little while.

BILL: I'm gonna reel it in, check my bait.

BOB: Ovid said that love is the perpetual source of fears and anxieties.

BILL: You're a fountain of information, Bob, a fountain of information. See the bastard's skunked me.

BOB: Have a shrimp. You don't think you will kill her?

BILL: I might find myself killing her. Walk up to her like a scene in a dream. Not plan to do it. Just walk into it.

BOB: You hate her?

BILL: This shrimp'll catch something just you watch. No I don't hate her. I've known her too long to have any feelings at all toward her.

(*Bob nods. Short pause.*)

BOB: Somebody took the fence down.

BILL: Beg pardon?

BOB: When we was growing up in Lubbock we used to say that the only thing between Amarillo and the North Pole was a barbed wire fence. Then when a blue norther blew in we'd say: somebody took the fence down.

BILL: Ferry just came in. See the cars.

BOB: Of course if you ever needed an alibi you could say we was fishin'.

BILL: Damn white of you, Bob.

BOB: You should take her to that Italian place in Gilchrist.

BILL: They got some new *Longarms* in the AARP library I may go read this afternoon.

BOB: Library's only open on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

BILL: What difference would a barb wire fence make?

(*Short pause*)

BILL: I got a bite.

BOB: Steady boy play it awhile.

BILL: You don't need to tell me how to fish.

BOB: Just being friendly.

BILL: It's a redfish. Just look at that color. Like catching dawn.

BOB: It's a fighter.

(*Bill struggles with the fish.*)

BOB: Hope no gull gets it.

BILL: Shut your damn mouth. Here it comes. It's a redfish alright. Help me with the net.

BOB: It's a pretty one. Remember to get some lemons at Thom's.

BILL: If my damn daughter would drive down I'd save it for the weekend.

BOB: Think you could pretend with them?

BILL: I *already* pretend with them. I pretend I like Ralph.

BOB: There she goes. Have another shrimp.

BILL: Told ya that last one was the trick.

BOB: What'll you think'll happen now?

BILL: Well, Bob, you may think I'm crazy but I got a strong feeling that I'll walk that sandy road and then up the stairs to the kitchen and there'll be a different woman there. Not Mildred. Maybe a Mary or a Mabel. And she'll be fussin' around the kitchen and actin' like *she's* been married to me for years. *She'll* be in all the pictures in all the dusty albums and I'll never know for sure.

BOB: You *have* been renting too many movies.

(*Pause*)

BILL: It's getting cloudy.

BOB: Thirty per cent chance of rain.

BILL: (*Slowly*) You have dreams like that?

BOB: Sometimes.

BILL: We're all murderers.

BOB: Bill, you need to drive into Houston and get laid if you can still get it up.

BILL: Don't talk like that.

BOB: Or go to a porno movie. It'll ground you quicker than anything.

BILL: Won't change the pretending.

(*Short pause*)

BOB: You really see a meteor?

BILL: Damn sure did. Passed between us and the lights on the rig out there.

BOB: Maybe you should call somebody. Maybe there's a reward for something like that.

BILL: Who the hell should I call, the Department of Meteors?

BOB: There's a reward for weather balloons.

BILL: Somebody sends up weather balloons.

BOB: Maybe it was a satellite.

BILL: I'm going to drive to see my son in Colorado.

BOB: (*Surprised*) When?

BILL: Today. I'll go and get the car real quiet like so Mabel –

BOB: (*Quickly, forcefully*) Mildred

BILL: – whoever, so *she* won't know and I'll drive to Boulder and tell him I'm pretending. Man's supposed to let his son in on the great truths.

BOB: You're too old for a drive like that. Besides you haven't had your heart medicine today.

BILL: (*As though realizing it for the first time*) Maybe the medicine's a pretense too. Maybe the doctor's trying to kill me little by little with tiny doses of poison.

BOB: All the tourists are gone. Sure is quiet.

BILL: Wind makes a special sound in the empty streets.

(*Pause*)

BOB: Old age sound.

BILL: I got a bite, it's a strong one.

BOB: Hold it boy. Give it some play.

BILL: It's pulling me into the water. The line'll never hold.

BOB: Hold it boy. It'll be a record. Your pole's almost bent double.

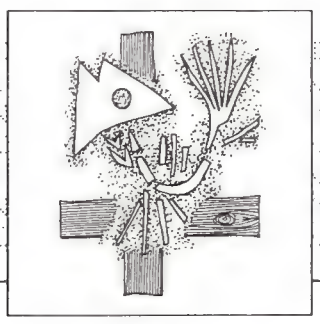
BILL: Bob, I can't let go!

BOB: (*Uninterested*) Hold it boy.

BILL: Bob. Help! I can't let go I can't let go. Bob. It's pulling me in. Help!

(*An invisible force pulls Bill into the water. Mildred removes her Bob mask. She begins packing her creel. She pinches her forearm then speaks in her normal voice.*)

MILDRED: Well, I guess I ain't dreaming. ❑



Don Webb's first book, *Uncle Ovid's Exercise Book*, was published last year to widespread acclaim. His work appears in many magazines, and with his wife Rosemary he contributes a regular reviews column for *New Pathways*.

Sailor on the Sea

BOUNTY

So he made the call and all it cost was two dead kids. And could he live with that? Some people he knew were offering encouragement. They were there with him in the booth, listening while he made the call.

"Gerald Harper-Jones," Danny said into the mouthpiece. "The Minister for Redevelopment. The big name is Norman P. Logrum of BioHavoc Teknik. His techs have developed their own monoclonals. Logrum's also major shareholder in Capital Network, and," he put his hand over his mouth and coughed violently, doubling over in the booth as his body weathered the viral storm. Just a little more, then it would be over.

"So, with his own MCA programme," he continued, "Logrum has all the angles covered. He can offer his business associates the whole hospitality trip, but unlike the competition, he can guarantee 100% protection. Harper-Jones passes zoning laws giving Logrum first option to exploit an area. Guy called Roger Conapse does the fieldwork. I'd guess there's Ministry of Media involvement in this, check Capital Network's franchise. That's it, 'cept there's two dead kids in there, no way to avoid it. Now get the R Squad here, fast. I'm across the road in a booth. Ten minutes? Fine." He hung up, feeling a quiet sense of satisfaction.

Now he was in pain and afraid. It's okay, MeatHawk said, you think they're gonna abandon their very best boy? SugarCube and BarrowBoy agreed but their presence did nothing to reassure him. He felt alienated, unable to trust them.

And still no sign of the R Squad, which meant he had to think about what sort of man he was. He didn't want to. It hurt to think, thinking about the killings. And was it worth it? The others grumbled, said fuck guilt and introspection. But what did they know about it? He was the one who was there, the one who could've saved them, if it hadn't been for duty. Was duty all there was? Yeah, BarrowBoy says, but Danny ignored the jibe.

MeatHawk nudged him, pointing up the road where a silver vehicle had turned into Brewer Street. The R Squad. Fear gushed out of him. He collapsed on the floor of the booth. The crew made no effort to help. Then the RS were all over him, easing him on to a stretcher, inserting needles in his veins, quietly, efficiently going about the business of saving him once more.

He felt excruciating pain, and behind it, the anticipatory bliss of detoxification. He should stay conscious but that meant extending thought. And they knew what he was thinking, because they were still part of him; the metastasis was not complete. He was thinking of the kids and, of Duty. No such guilt touched MeatHawk, no regret.

# of Tranquility

Mike O'Driscoll

HALCYON DAZE

Even as a child, Danny Butcher knew he was going to be an astronaut. Neither his parents nor his teachers took the matter seriously. The European Space Agency intake was low; NASA was bankrupt and the Soviets were not far behind. Only the Sino-Indian programme seemed viable and that was limited to putting satellites in orbit. Despite its low-profile, Danny still associated with Space, all the glamour of the Apollo expeditions and the Russian Volstock programme which had culminated with the Mars landing.

It was hard for him to stay earthbound.

"You're wasting my time again, Butcher," Mr Osborne, his French teacher, said. "I don't think I want you in my class anymore."

This pleased Danny; he didn't particularly want to be there. What use was French on the moon? Parlez-vous Lunerais? His parents failed to grasp the strength of his vision. His mother insisted that he aim for Law or Medicine, while his father, on those rare occasions when he talked to Danny, laughed at this, telling him he should get a job in the media, if fame and glamour were what he was after.

He tried so hard to make them understand, but now he had made his own decision. He would start with Mr Osborne. He gathered his books and left the classroom. From now on, he would tell them nothing. If he remained fit, got good grades in physics and engineering, he stood a chance of getting into the European Programme. But he had to be patient.

He went to the gym to practice free-fall on the ropes.

SANCTUARY (i): CURED MEAT

Beyond the bars a gibbous moon hung, silver and cold with quiet portent. His flesh tingled as he watched it, his fists clenching the bars. He wondered why they were taking so long and why this place seemed so unfamiliar. The bloated, sulphurous disc was the only fixed, recognizable point in his universe. He caressed his cheeks, his neck, feeling the sharp, prickly hairs, satisfying himself that he was still human.

Were they blaming him? If they just let him explain, he knew they would understand. They would classify it as an acceptable risk. Rooting out the core of truth demanded risks. There were no such things as innocent bystanders, only those who lived and those who died.

Glancing downwards, he saw the city's spires and towers, its glittering neon, an alien sight. Its proximity oppressed him. He wished he was higher up, closer to the moon.

There was a problem. He was unable to connect with all its intricacies, but it had to do with detoxification. Where was the magic bullet man? They couldn't expect him to give a full report first. Procedure said debriefing came after detox, it was written into his contract.

His isolation intensified as he became aware of the absence of MeatHawk and the crew. Had they abandoned him? He subverted his fear by recalling Neil, Buzz, Yuri and all the other spacemen; those were the best memories, they were all that remained of the dream. Somewhere below his knees, he sensed the beginnings of a new, more savage pain. It didn't scare him, not really.

"Hey Butcher!" a voice called from beyond the door. It was familiar and brutal.

"Hey Butcher!" it came again, intruding on his memories. With an effort of will, he managed to shut it out completely. Nobody listened. Sometimes they never listened at all. But he told them anyway.

THE DEAD

When his father died, Danny did not go to the funeral. Even when the truth about the old man surfaced like scum on a pond – all those years of lies, whores, hypocrisy and the virus-ridden body – he could still not find it within himself to go home. He remembered with bitterness his father's refusal to fund his first year at the Stuttgart College of Astronautics. Even then, he'd clung to his ambition. He'd done a year at Law School, working nights as a V Special. It was his first job and the money he put aside got him through one year in Stuttgart.

Before the start of his second year, he got a form letter from ESA announcing the suspension of all training programmes. They expressed regret. He did another year at law school, the ashes of his dream lying dormant inside him, like a disease.

When the Sino-Indian agency announced a moratorium on their European intake, Danny's despair had given way to guilt. He saw that he had isolated himself from the real world. He received a letter from an uncle. His mother was dying. He reconciled with her before his father's disease sucked away the last dregs of her beauty and her life. He watched her die and unknown to himself, his priorities went through a process of realignment. He found he no longer wanted to be a spaceman. It was no longer enough.

SEER

Danny quit law school at the end of his second year and signed up for the police force. His eighteen months as a V Special meant he got exemptions and was through basic in less than two months. After two years as a regular, he felt he was ready for something more.

When Danny infiltrated the Islington Kid-ring and came out with names, the Media got hold of the story and made him a hero. He used it to his advantage and got the transfer he'd been requesting – to the Department of Special Police, or, as they were known, the Department sans Portfolio.

After three months, he was considered at best an oddball, at worst a sicko. He ignored the jibes; he did the job better than anybody else.

In the locker room, Danny was meeting his team.

"Word is, Butcher," a female cop called Rusoe said, "you're hot for guys."

"Officer Butcher," Spengler, a black agent said, "he'll fuck anything in the line of duty."

They laughed. Danny ignored them. Nothing they said could phase him. To them, this was only a job. They planned strategy according to the latest statistics. Prostitution, porn, rape – all were static. But he saw through the graphs; he sensed the approach of a new enemy, a new corruption. He knew that fresh guidelines, an original strategy, would have to be laid down for the coming war. They would create a new force. Soon, others would see what was coming, then they would act.

Out on the streets, the new diseases were already tightening their grip. Child AIDS cases were increasing by 100% per annum and HSV 3 was becoming HSV 4. They were in a constant state of mutation, which meant the police and medical authorities would have to mutate right along with them. Danny Butcher would be there, waiting.

They left the station. It was their first assignment together. Danny wondered whether Rusoe and Spengler would make the cut.

SANCTUARY (ii): TRANQUILITY

His confusion was caused by an inability to differentiate between SugarCube and Danny, between syphilitic reality and deprogramming. Under or not? He didn't feel straight, he hadn't seen SugarCube come in, nor Danny go. He shivered violently; the air vibrating against him, an unfamiliar pain.

He tried to call out for help, but all that escaped his lips was, "Wad ... wuh ... wuh ... wuh ..." No real words.

Some part of him had been through this before, but not the part that was Danny. Was that why he'd gone? Were they witholding antibodies, or had he ODed on cytotoxins? That was always a risk, especially with a totally alien antigen. But this was not his antigen, not his pain. If it scares you, he told himself, give it up. He was scared but this was duty: purification was only one small part of it, no greater than any of the other risks.

His limbs hummed in communion with the moon, as if they shared with it a secret understanding. SugarCube sat, staring at him from the corner.

LADDERS

The Kronstadt Sperm Bank snatch was a big break for Danny. Prime quality genetic material, guaranteed viral-free, donated by the political and social elite, the rip-off caused a senior Network executive's wife (as yet, childless), to have a heart attack and the financial ruin of a little known, but extremely profitable holding company. The ransom, when it arrived, was enormous.

There was the question of ownership. Who was the ransom demand aimed at? Finally, after three days, Danny persuaded a leading geneticist to admit publicly to being one of the donors. He was speaking up because, he said, this heinous crime posed a threat to the future genetic wealth of the nation. And because the Kronstadt Sperm Bank provided over 60% of his research funds.

Following this act of public-spiritedness, other donors came forward, and between their admissions and Network interest, the story went out prime time.

Danny, along with Rusoe and Spengler, probed deeper.

At a state brothel down in Funville, Rusoe used her charm on an intern who worked at the New Central Hospital. He'd heard rumours about some organ runner breaking into the big time as a result of his latest move.

Danny followed the rumours to source, a skin man operating out of Harley Street. The surgeon said he didn't know who had the stuff, but he knew the prospective purchasers. They were a left-wing brains trust linked with numerous insurgent groups throughout the region. They had instigated the snatch but the middle man had double-crossed them. If the bank came up with a better offer, the stuff was theirs.

In forty-eight hours, Danny had infiltrated the group via a Hampstead bordello. They saw the snatch as an insurance policy that guaranteed their success into the next generation.

Under DSP instructions, Kronstadt's refused to pay the ransom. Danny was there at the brothel as Angel, when Angel was only a name. He took delivery of the stuff and called in the team. It was his first deep infiltration and he came out of it with only a mild dose of gonorrhoea, and a big name.

Half the batch was destroyed in the operation, but of course Kronstadt's were insured. DSP got a fat cheque from a Network for exclusive coverage of the raid. Ratings were high, and Danny was a star. He received a commendation from the Chief of Police.

Then someone tried to take him out while he was working on a rogue AIDS case. Two bullets passed through his body but failed to connect with anything vital. When he recovered, his superiors told him about the new drug the techs had developed, a synthetic derivative of psilocybin. It was an undercover aid, they said. From now on, when he went deep, he would be more than a name, he would be someone else, someone untraceable.

SNAKES

Danny was working bait along with Rusoe and Keno, an eager young cop recently recruited from vice. Spengler was dead. AIDS. They were working on that side of things. They were working fast; Danny and Rusoe were both production lines for HIV 7.

"This new department everyone's talking about," Keno said as their unmarked Ford turned off Palladin Avenue and headed west along Shaftsbury Avenue. "What sort of brief they considering?"

Behind the wheel, Rusoe threw him a contemptuous glance and said, "What're you concerning yourself with that for? We have a job to do now, concentrate on that."

"Whadda you say, Butcher?" Keno said, glancing at Danny in the back.

"I say listen to Rusoe if you want to stay alive," Danny said. "She knows more than you."

So Keno shut his mouth and listened to Rusoe, only he didn't listen hard enough. They sent him in as a client to the 'Northern Lights' – a gay bordello with a sideline in underage continentals – and when Danny, as MeatHawk, got inside three days later, he found what was left of Officer Keno in the basement, stuffed in a vat of beerslops.

MeatHawk, like a method actor, became what he appeared to be. Rusoe was his connection to reality – waiting for the call. Everybody sucked up to MeatHawk, wanting a piece of him, like he was next year's thing come six months early. To see him operate was to appreciate his technique. There was no artifice; he became a master of masochism, which was rare in the days of the disease.

After three nights the grapevine was buzzing with word of his head, but that was for the amateurs. The real connoisseurs wanted something more and knew he'd give it. They paid top money to see him cut into himself, to take them on three or more at a time. When he came, he came; when he bled, it was real blood.

For a week Rusoe heard nothing, no word at all. Danny might have been dead, she had no way of knowing. The contact was one way only. Danny's method was trust. Get that, 100%. Prove to them he was who he said he was, no matter what it took. Then they'd give what he needed. When he had that, he'd fade quietly from the scene and make the call. Rusoe would extract him before the raid and get him to the lab. This time, when she got him out, he was dying and they both knew it. The medtechs subjected him to a new treatment, using experimental monoclonal antibodies. It was the only thing that could have saved him.

When the announcement came through on Network Direct, Danny was being purified. MeatHawk was gone and his body was being cleansed of all its viral demons. This time, they did not mention Danny's name, just the collars: the President of a hotel chain and two judges from the inner zone circuit.

When Danny came out of the coma after three weeks, the new department had come into existence. It was called the Health Force and its brief was high-level corruption and disease. Danny was number one agent. When a Scotland Yard detective christened them the Fuck Squad as an insult, he started using it himself and pretty soon it stuck.

SANCTUARY (iii): THE WILD COLONIAL

What shit was in his veins that made the moonlight sear his eyes? Had he fucked up after all?

He closed them and stumbled from the window, white-hot needle pains firing up his legs, each step taking forever. When he reached the bunk, he collapsed in tears. He was so weary, so unimaginably weak.

What was wrong with him? The not knowing fed his terror. He had to open his eyes, if only to strangle it and reorient his mind. His eyelids flickered but the light still burned.

He had to know exactly what was inside him, he decided, as he chewed frenetically at his lips. He ignored the blood dripping on to his white shirt, wondering for a second where Danny and the rest were. Then he unzipped his pants, pulled them down and examined his genitals. The suppurating ulcers on his penis told him all he needed to know. He lifted his shirt and examined the blisters that pockmarked his stomach. His heart thrummed to the tune of the damned.

He calmed himself with an old mantra BarrowBoy had taught him. An MCA-8 or 9 would eradicate them and his body would purify itself once more. He had to have patience. Danny wouldn't let him down. Danny was a big man on the force.

And what about this Logrum bust? They might even make Danny Commander. He thought about this, then dismissed it. Where was the attraction? Why make the Commander? Arctor was too old, too gone to flab.

He saw then, that the others had finally come home. Except Angel. He still mourned him, even after all this time; he'd been the first. It was that woman's fault, the perp. He didn't remember her name. It didn't matter what she was, they were all only receptacles, fermentation vats for the new diseases. He would wipe them all out.

The metastases, SugarCube and BarrowBoy beneath the window, leered at the moon, scented blood on the wind; only the parent cell was absent. MeatHawk lurched to the door and pounded on it. What about all those perps he'd sent down? Their faces came back, rats bleating threats, mentioning his superiors by name and talking in undertones about loss of pension and revocation of viral-status. Had they really thought they could get to him that way? He was fucking incorruptible – had no one told them?

He was savage with disease yet knew it was so much wasted tissue to be blown away at the next touch of the needle. But didn't they have it in their blood too? Yes, but they had their own detox programmes now. He squared up to the pain and felt relieved when he remembered the Logrum job. Somewhere beneath the crippling torment, there was pride.

He went back to the window and gripped the bars, trying to stare down the moon. It didn't move – it just hung paralysed in the sky, defying him. He trembled as sweat trickled into his eyes. Space seemed to be shrinking.

The knots in his stomach tightened abruptly. He wanted to lie down but it hurt. He sprawled to the floor, writhing, and heaved fist-sized clots of dark blood up on to the pristine surface. He felt a crushing sense of guilt and wondered if they'd understand. Throughout the room, the ulceration of the distant colonies continued unabated.

INAMORATA

"But do you love me, Angel?" Juno wanted to know. Her voice was more than a plea – it cut into his endocarditic heart, made him want to weep.

If he had been Angel, he could've understood, but he was Danny now, a cop who hated corruption and disease, wherever they manifested themselves. Angel could love, even MeatHawk could love, but not Officer Butcher. He was already regretting coming up for Juno. She was riddled.

"Jesus Angel, I really need to know," she said, crying bitter tears on the sofa in her apartment. The room was small and windowless and stank of dirt and whiskey.

He looked at her, recalling who he was, and why. And what did she mean to him? And realised the truth that she wasn't his girl anyway. She was Angel's and he was submerged and unreachable for ... a little while?

She was oriental and her scent was a mystery. So strange she might be from some other planet or moon. One he had walked on? Her pale skin had a translucent quality, a purity that illuminated her, giving her more life than she really had. It roused his suspicion. He leaned across the sofa, close up to her and let his eyes pierce her flesh and was intoxicated with her potential, but only for a second because when the drunken mist cleared he saw the slimy carcinoma creeping through her, decalcifying her bones.

And felt it inside himself, gorging. He was saddened, but it didn't matter.

"So?" she pleaded, planting urgent kisses on his sunken cheeks.

"In a way," he said, "I suppose I do." She lay on his lap and he cradled her in his arms where she cried with blissful pain. When an hour had passed and she was calm, he left the apartment and called her name and viral-status through to base.

He never mentioned that he'd broken cover so when they deprogrammed him, he took a monoclonal dose designed for Angel – who had been the one who loved, really loved Juno.

It was Danny's only encounter with love. Recovering after Detox, he decided to leave it to MeatHawk, Angel and the rest. Only the dose did something to him, something bad and afterwards, he could never be Angel again. The accusation in Angel's eyes was more than he could bear.

Juno's post-mortem revealed that they could have saved her. Chronic salpingitis with complications and antigens for hepatitis B. Small fry, an unregistered whore working outside the system. No upline connections as he had suspected, a loner. Yet the memory of her was strong and painful and would take some suppressing.

He succeeded, but the loss of Angel stayed with him.

SANCTUARY (iv): SPACE

The world was closing in on him. Someone had turned out the lights. On the bunk the four whoresons of the apocalypse took turns with Juno. Beneath the window, he foamed with impotent rage, watching, helpless, infected with their evil. It had never been this bad before. He tore his eyes from the bunk, afraid, yet drawn to the madness. It would never do to succumb. He knew, knew for certain, that this was nothing more than a pre-detox hallucination.

But that didn't help; the pain was still present.

He wished Danny was too, but there was so little room in the over-crowded universe.

DESSERT

"You've done a splendid job, Butcher," the Health Force Chief declared.

Danny said nothing, just sat waiting for the real purpose of the meeting.

"And now I want you to take a break," the Chief said, glancing at the papers on his desk, avoiding Danny's eyes.

"Break?" said Danny.

"According to your file you've taken eight days in two years."

"Commander Arctor has said nothing to me. I don't need leave at present."

"You're not a superman, Butcher, you're a cop."

"I want to finish this case I'm working on."

"Oh come on Butcher, that's as good as wrapped up according to Arctor. Leave the loose ends to us. "

"I started the case, I want to call it in," Danny said, rising.

"Sit down, Officer Butcher, we're not finished," the Chief said. He waited till Danny sat down, then went on. "Look son, you're one of our best agents, we need you healthy."

"Bullshit. Why don't you just tell me what's going on. I been treading on DSP toes or something? Vice think they'd like a collar for a change? This fucking departmental politics has got nothing to do with me. I have to finish it, I gotta get the names."

"Who's working deep?"

"MeatHawk."

"Again? Look Butcher. You're going to burn yourself out, you'll erupt. You're becoming obsessive. We want dedication, not suicide."

"Someone at Central HQ is pissed off about the direction this one is headed? Is that it, Chief?"

"Don't make stupid speculations, Butcher."

"Then why do you want me off this case?"

"Fred Arctor wants you on it, but I won't needlessly waste your life. I've examined your medical reports. Sixteen different MCAs this year already. You're producing antibodies for gonococcus, prostatitis, spirochaeta pallida, hepatitis B, HSV 2 and HIV 1 through to 17. You're a biochemical production unit. We need to pull you off field status and see how this is affecting your operational capability."

"We both know that if I'm pulled off this, the big fish will swim. And the collar is worthless without them. Put someone else in and you'll fuck the whole thing up."

"Okay Butcher, I'm tired of arguing with you," the Chief said as he stood up. "I tried to tell you."

"Sure you did," Danny said, walking to the door.

"Finish it then, Butcher."

"I always do, you know that."

SANCTUARY (v): JUNK

MeatHawk howled at the lonesome moon that waited patiently for the lycanthropic metamorphosis. The blood in his veins followed a lunar flux that washed up on shores of pain.

He watched, sensing he could not afford to miss a single thing; none of those he'd ever been would slip through without his knowing. He went over those names he could still recall, counting them on brittle fingers, wondering if he'd ever been Lon Chaney. Somewhere in the city of the past, there was a place that housed all the ones he'd ever been; all the diseases, the parasites and viruses. Everyone of them.

Still no trace of Danny. Perhaps he was hurting somewhere? The pain after all, was simply intolerable. He deserved better, they all did; Christ, hadn't he called in the names?

Sudden light penetrated his cornea; a pure, uncut, white light that seared his retina. And then voices.

"Med ... med ... med ... sin?" he said.

SAILOR

Warm mist gusted over silk, dampening MeatHawk's naked thigh. A tall man crawled out of the haze towards him, his eyes wet with need.

"It's best to leave them afterwards," the man said.

"I understand, Gerald," MeatHawk said without regret.

A third man sat near the two bodies, cradling a lifeless head, caressing the cooling flesh while his own body tremored with pleasure's remnants. He turned to the other two and said, "Some more?"

"Not for me," MeatHawk said, smiling as he felt Gerald's

fingers stroke his scaly back. His eyes shone with desire; his mottled flesh was the texture of boiling marble. "I'm sated."

"My wife told me some of the things you did for her," Gerald said. "She said you had a stunning technical repertoire."

"Oh he has," the third man said, leaving the young corpses and sliding over the silk cushions towards his companions. "But you see," he went on, "Meat is a rare treasure. Meat is decay personified, slow, elongated death. One can truly savour the performance. Not that we want him to go just yet, of course."

"Indubitably, Roger, indubitably," Gerald said.

MeatHawk shut out their words. Compassion bled from him, a cold, useless compassion – his participation had been necessary. He had the names now, yet there remained the closing moves.

"No problem there," Roger was saying as he drew vapour from a crystal pipe, deep into his lungs. For awhile, he said nothing. Then, as the high receded, he said, "An arrangement exists."

"Yes?" Gerry asked.

"We import from the north, utilising government approved rigs. Inexhaustible source. Makes economic sense for our contacts there and helps alleviate the food shortage problems they're always having. What kind of life is it for kids up there anyway? Poverty, disease, starvation? At least here, some of them have the chance to graduate, to become someone like our boy here."

"Good old Meat," Gerry laughed, slapping Meathawk on the shoulders. "You're simply the crème de la crème."

"Not everyone ends up like our two little poppets over there," Roger said.

"And the anti-virals?" Gerry said.

"Norman's R&D people report one hundred per cent efficacy."

"And Meat?" Gerry said, his gaze sweeping over the quiescent MeatHawk.

"Oh, he's beyond all that. He transcends the need for rehabilitation, hahahaha."

MeatHawk smiled as the mists swirled about them.

SANCTUARY (vi): BEACHED

He was a dry and empty husk with nothing left to bring up. Except the disease.

"Come on Butcher, easy now." Voices whispering in his ear, hands gripping him, adding to the torment. Opening his eyes he discovered blindness. He panicked. The virus was accelerating, mutating too fast.

"Take it fucking easy," a second voice said. "God, he bloody stinks."

"Liver's most likely gone," the first man said.

"Did we get them?" MeatHawk asked the unseen figures.

"Course we did, Danny," a third voice, Commander Arctor, said. MeatHawk relaxed.

"Put him on the bunk," Arctor said, then to MeatHawk: "We made a clean sweep Danny, all loose ends being wrapped up right at this moment."

"If I don't get outta here soon, I think I'm gonna puke," the second man said.

"Shut up," Arctor snapped. "We're starting treatment now Danny. There wasn't time to get you back to Detox ward, so we'll do it here."

Here? MeatHawk didn't understand. Why had they taken so long if there was so little time? Or did time pass more slowly for him than it did for them? Where were Danny and Angel, BarrowBoy and SugarCube? "Tell me what the moon says?" he whispered, pointing to where he thought it should be.

"What's he on about now," the first man moaned.

Should he be Danny? He didn't know. He wanted to close his eyes but he was afraid of the dark, afraid Danny had abandoned him.

"Right," Arctor said. "Relax now Danny, you won't feel a thing." A needle slid neatly into one of MeatHawk's still-functioning veins and a stream of immuno-suppressant flowed into his blood. He marvelled silently at the Commander's deft touch. So expert, so caring, he could've been a medtech.

"Good," MeatHawk muttered as pain receded.

"Bye bye Danny," Arctor said.

"Sweet dreams," the first man said.

"Thank fuck," the second man said. "He's just shit himself."

He was alone. He saw things clearly.

He stood up and walked with huge, ungainly steps to the window, lunar driven. He felt the drug inside his veins, but his euphoria was muted. Even so, he was acutely aware of the strange things it was doing to his body. He detected the subtle changes in his physiological functions, even the automatic ones.

A spike of pain shot through him, forced him rigid and snapped his teeth shut, severing part of his tongue, the part that had been trying to put some moisture on his cracked lips. He swallowed it instinctively and experienced the exquisite pleasure that comes with the slowing of the blood's flow. He wished Danny and the others were around to share the feeling. He missed them.

And stilled missed them when the flow ceased.

"Come back," MeatHawk said.

In an outer colony, Danny hid, afraid of the pain. ❑

Mike O'Driscoll lives with his wife and young daughter in Swansea, where he runs a video shop. In between watching lots of bad videos, he finds relief reading Harlan Ellison and Lucius Shepard, to name but two. He is a recent contributor to *Works*, and has other stories in the pipeline with *Auguries* and *Maelstrom*.

SOMETIMES WE Come Back

The man was not yet thirty when he had the conversation with the book editor. It was terribly humid that July night when they sat near the sands of Oak Street Beach and spoke of immortality.

He had met the woman at The Drake, and as they crossed Walton Street to the Lake Shore Drive underpass, the fickle Chicago wind had taunted the hem of her dress. The dress was the exact color of the blueberry Freeze Pops the writer had loved as a child. A cabbie turning onto Michigan Avenue honked appreciatively at the flash of thigh in the moment before she pressed her Canetti briefcase against her skirt; this he would always remember, as he would the Badfinger song suspended in mid-air from the Checker Cab's radio, the frantic yapping of a dog in the park off Bellevue Place, the sudden nostalgia of those long ago summers filled with icy blue treats that were no longer manufactured, the sun bronzing their skin in near-dusk tones, and everything else in that one moment, as slow moving as a drop of grey mercury, that Jenna Montoya had told him that, after three rewrites, Perdition Press had placed his book on the spring schedule.

He had still felt human then.

They had sat on the beach near the hot dog stand. The final contract was drawn up, the echo of the editor's briefcase snap loud in the post-rush hour evening. The dog had done its duty and was being walked to a waiting car. Two lovers shared a secret near the ululating shoreline, the lake whispering with them, the girl laughing like someone in a Life Savers TV commercial.

Nothing had *truly* changed; the writer had not won the lottery or become sole beneficiary in a will, and he would still have to work his day job at the Crate & Barrel and continue paying the minimum payment due on his credit cards.

Only now, he was immortal.

He would be one of the legends of horror.

The woman was saying something to him. "... so real, so true to life. The realism you put into your final draft, especially the sections dealing with Windahl's nervous disorder and his relationship to his murdered friend was what sold them, I think."

She raised an eyebrow at him and he had to say something quickly so that she would think that he'd been listening to her the entire time. "You're right," came out of his mouth, followed by a dyslalic stutter.

"You're excited, I know." A hand fluttered to her breast. "I know I was, years ago, when dinosaurs roamed the earth." Laughter, like a wood sprite's.

The writer had hoped that it wasn't true, that it was just his polishing of syntax or metaphor. But a dark part of him knew that it was the *reality*, not the fiction, of his writing that the editors and the publishers liked. Until he started cannibalizing his friends' lives, his writing was almost, but not quite, there.

What would Victor Tremulis really think when he saw the most personal shards of his nervous breakdown aimed at him from the printed pages of his co-worker's novel? Would he think that the writer had killed him, sucking his life blood, this in itself a small price, a *pittance*. Tremulis and his thorazine angels give up their souls to pay for the writer's extended life.

And how many times would he do it again in order to survive? He felt empty and wished that he could bury himself in the earth as the old vampires of legend did when they were too weary to continue living their lies. Their mockery of life.

Only seconds had passed.

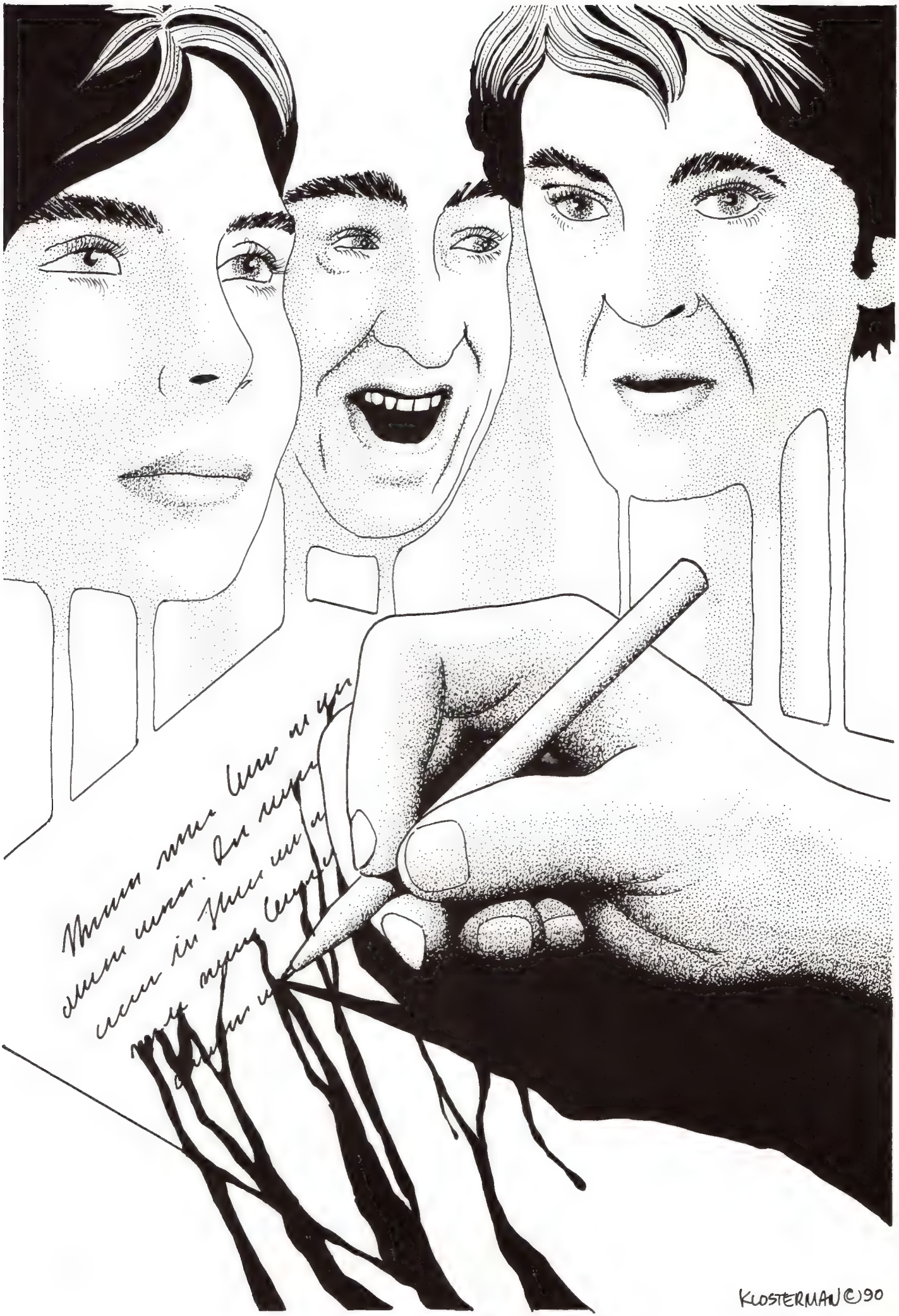
"And it would be a good thing," the woman continued, "to circulate amongst your peers. The World Fantasy Convention will be in Seattle this October. I can arrange for you to be there." She stopped speaking then, surveying his face as if it held the clue to a murderer's identity. The lovers had long since passed out of view. The sun, now low in the west, threw long shadows over One Magnificent Mile and the brownstones along the Gold Coast.

"It would make for great atmosphere, you being there," she concluded.

You being there, he thought. *The convention would be like the set of a graveyard in a Universal picture. All the immortals. Yea, me being there. What about Victor Tremulis, he's one of my undead now. What about Cassady, while we're at it? Talk about creating new legends ...*

The writer's nostrils flared at these thoughts, and the woman took this to be a sign of tiredness. She stood. Her

Wayne Allen Sallee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skirt sliding down her thighs as she straightened the wrinkles had the susurrus of bat wings.

A promise to meet the following afternoon for lunch at Arnie's and she was gone. Night had descended again on the city.

He sat there those long empty hours, staring at the black of Lake Michigan. The moon rose above the water, stretching a white fingernail to the shore. Time had no meaning to him now. The moon arced behind other buildings. He caught a glimpse of it occasionally, not even aware that he was watching for it.

He stared at the stars that lined the sky, searching for a smudge that was the Andromeda Galaxy, a blurred spot of light already a million years old. He wondered if those like him scanned the night skies and contemplated similar things.

His thoughts kept circling back like vultures to carrion. Two questions. What did she do to me? *What have I become?*

Then he wondered if, when the sun came up, would he walk away or be impaled by the rays and turned to dust.

I remember when he first thought of that story," Joan said. "We were at Moravian College in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Beth and Jeff were there, too." The housewife from Shoreham, New York, avoided looking at the gravestone directly.

"He always compared the conventions, even Necon, with the Theater of Vampires in the Annie Rice novels," Peggy explained to Yvonne, Jeffrey, and his wife Barb. The publisher from Hell's Kitchen had published his first story and was surprised to find herself a character in his last. The writer had let titles for stories float in his head for months before the Muse would strike him the right way; he stockpiled titles and word combinations in what Karl Edward Wagner called a 'commonplace book'.

"Sometimes We Come Back" was written in longhand in February, 1989. On a Saturday morning in March, the writer was run down by a car when he tried to cut across the street at 55th and Fairfield to catch a bus. *And so my soul I do expunge, my brain is now a scarlet sponge,* he said into a mini-recorder that Dr Schiappa held with stronger hands. The writer called his poem "Dead On My Feet". He expired that same night.

"First time I, oh this is morbid," Yvonne said, her blond hair masking her expression. "This is the first time I've seen him where he wasn't writing in his notebook. I *know* that's sick, but ..."

She let it trail, then, as twilight arrived. The gravesite was black against the litter of autumn leaves.

"Happy Halloween," Barb said to the stone. "You made me laugh."

"You know, I bet he's down there, running inside his skin," Jeffrey said to no one in particular. It gave him an idea for a story of his own.

The five walked back to the Osier's Duster and left Matheson Cemetery behind them. Minutes later, true darkness fell over the still, undisturbed grave.

Nothing would ever claw its way out, contrary to what we might tell you. ❑

Wayne Allen Sallee last appeared in **BBR** with "The Penultimate Horror Story" in issue #11. A regular contributor to DAW's *The Year's Best Horror Stories*, his new novel *The Holy Terror* is soon to be published by Mark Ziesing. "Sometimes We Come Back" is one of 28 stories in a collection due to appear in October 1990, also from Ziesing.

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FLESHFLOWERS

Here in exile, I have learned how much it is possible to miss the Earth.

Oh, don't mistake my meaning. It's not as some repository of metaphysical meaning that I miss it. Birthplace of humanity, ancestral globe, big blue marble on a black cloth sprayed with diamond chips. What a load of bullshit. No, I miss only the luxurious life I had there, civilization and all its tinsel trappings. The money, the prestige, the women, the food and wine, sleek imported Brazilian cars and elegant Harlem apartments in the clouds.

I can hardly believe now that I used to pity myself then. Sure, I had had a few rough

PAUL DI FILIPPO

breaks. Failures of will and nerve that rankled, disappointed expectations, evaporated dreams. But my work had its rewards – when it was going good, and I could lose myself in it – and the material comforts more than compensated for the spiritual pangs. Compared to the lives of most people, mine was an easy lark.

Or so it appears now, from the vantage of another world. A world empty of everything I once coveted, a world where the glittering ranks of society consist of a few dozen men and women, preoccupied with science and survival.

When I can't stand their fatuous faces any more – and the face of one in particular – I find I have to get outside the domes, and let the elements abrade some of the emotional callous from my soul.

I must start initiating the changes a couple of hours before I want to step out. It's a demanding process, and I can't do it that often – maybe once a month. (Of course, I could just suit up, but then I'd feel encapsulated, as if I were carrying the colony with me. And besides, it's more dramatic this way. I know it creeps the others out, to see me do it. They watch me through the transparent walls until I disappear from sight, disbelief plain on their silly faces. It reinforces my failing sense of superiority.)

Anyway, about three hours worth of self-tampering – much against my old instructor's advice – allows me, rather like certain seals, to supersaturate my bloodstream with enough oxygen to last for half an hour's expedition. A slight structural change in my hemoglobin suffices. I toughen my epidermis with a layer of expendable cells that will later messily slough off, stoke the metabolic fires, thicken my corneas, don a pair of insulated boots as my only concession to heat loss, and cycle through the lock.

Not breathing, I step lightly among the red grit and wind-fluted parched pebbles, kicking one now and then. Their motions are strange in the low gravity, they seem to take forever to fall. A frigid dry scentless breeze strokes my altered flesh like a straight-razor dipped in liquid hydrogen. Too much of this caress would be lethal even to me. In the leeward sides of the larger boulders, fine-grained brick-hued dust is piled high.

Fifteen miles away to either side of me rear the canyon walls: immense, pocked, riven, mile-long slopes whose steepness is obscured by great slumps of eroded rock clinging precariously to their faces. Crumbled talus litters the valley floor at their feet; side cuts open out onto dead-end tributary valleys.

When I am far enough from the base for solitude, around a slight bend, having used up half my stored oxygen, I stop.

I look up.

At dusk, like a man immured in a well on Earth, I am able to view the stars while the weak sun is still up. They stand out faintly in the slit of darkened Martian sky, occulted perhaps by a high lonely transient cloud, blurred slightly by my horned corneas. I try to find the blue-green star I have convinced myself is Earth.

For a few precious minutes, I dream of returning.

What I don't know yet is how reality will exceed my dreams.

As I turn to go back, I feel like the only person in the universe. No one can reach me here. Even if others were to arrive in suits, they would still be isolated from me. I am at once utterly exposed and totally shielded

Then I involuntarily recall what I have been trying to forget. There is one who could stand here unsuited beside me, as an equal. A woman at this moment also exiled to Mars. One bound to me by something different from, but no weaker than, love.

And stronger than hate.

I was standing rapt among the cacti when the news first came.

One of the big linked geodesic domes that comprised the only human settlement on Mars was filled with giant saguaros, multi-armed, towering almost twenty-five feet high – as tall as specimens a century old, although they were only five years removed from biofabbed seeds. Their fantastic growth had been forced by the will of the Banneker psychokineticist who had preceded me.

Now the cacti were my charges, along with the humans. I and my fellow-exile were responsible for the health and continued functioning of both.

I prefered tending to the cacti.

Now, fingertips in contact with the solid spined barrel trunk of one specimen, I had lost myself in their being.

I dived down, among the busy cell-factories of the cactus I touched, thrilled by a sense of repleteness that came from water-riches stored safely away. Further and further into the trunk my perception raced, assaulted by a distorted mix of sensory input it had taken me years to learn to untangle. Those tarragon-scented, fuzzy violet tangles were chloroplasts, these bloated electric sparkles were vacuoules. I revelled in a vegetative serenity somehow different from the same mechanisms when present in humans ...

Deeper now, below the soil, down into the unnaturally thick and elongated filamented roots, probing, searching with blind tropisms for the water locked as ice beneath the Martian surface. Thirst-seek, thirst-seek, thirst-seek –

Someone was shaking my shoulder. As if from a great distance, I sensed it. Pulling my psychic feelers back in, I returned to my own body.

Joelle Fourier, the colony's areologist, removed her hand from my shoulder. My face must have expressed some of my annoyance, for she stepped back warily.

"Doctor Strode, I wouldn't have disturbed you if it wasn't important. The expedition is returning, and there's trouble."

English was the lingua franca of the colony. Fourier's was pleasantly accented. She wore a white quilted coverall with an embroidered ESA patch showing an antique Ariane rocket above the breast. She was a veteran in her abstruse field, already an ancient eighteen. After three years' association with her, I knew nothing about her save this bare minimum of appearance, name and age, and didn't care to.

"What kind of trouble?" I asked.

"Why, medical, of course. The messages have been vague, but that much is clear."

I turned away. "Let Sanjour handle it. It's her watch."

"I cannot make Doctor Sanjour answer. She is locked in her quarters."

"Shit. She's probably cellburning. Okay, let's go roust her before she smokes her entire cortex."

The cacti occupied circles of raw Martian soil separated by sintered rock paths topped with a ceramic glaze that was

micro-grooved for traction when wet by occasional spills made when tapping the saguaros. I followed Fourier toward the dome exit. I fantasized that the cacti all bent toward me, reluctant to let me go, wanting to clutch me in their friendly deadly arms.

The two domes containing the living quarters were subdivided into truncated pie-pieces that opened onto central plant-filled atriums scattered with chairs and cushions.

At Sanjour's door other colonists had gathered, sensing something was up. Their garments exhibited all the different patches of the many nations and organizations that made up the Comity. Their faces looked pale in the weak Martian sunlight that filtered down through the transparent dome top. The mostly young men and women shuffled nervously from foot to foot and whispered among themselves as I approached with Fourier. Make way for the pariah who holds your lives in his hands, folks ...

They cleared a path to the door for me. I tapped the *Open* button on the security keypad. The red *Locked* light lit up, there was a beep, and the door stayed shut.

"Who's got the override code?"

A boy I recognized as one of the astronomers stepped up.

"Holtzmann left the codes with me," he said. "But I don't know about breaching Doctor Sanjour's privacy –"

I saw as through a crimson curtain. "Listen, kid, we've got an incoming POGO full of sick citizens, and one of the two available medicos is locked in her room most assuredly burning her fucking neurons up for kicks. I suggest that the situation amounts to enough of an emergency to violate anyone's privacy. But if you want to call it differently –"

I shrugged and made as if to walk away.

"No, no, you're right, of course. I just didn't realize – Look, I'll open it right up."

He frantically keyed in the code. The door retreated into the wall.

I stepped inside.

The sight of a naked body I knew almost more intimately than my own, both surface and interior, greeted me. Amy was sprawled slack-limbed across her bed. Her eyes were closed, and a rivulet of saliva drooled her chin. She might have been just a sloppy sleeper. But she wasn't. She was lost in a self-induced, self-sustaining bonfire of near-orgasmic pleasure, a pyre fed by the destruction of her own braincells, which, continued too long, would result in her death.

Suddenly I felt overwhelmed by pity and loathing for the two of us. What a couple of pathetic feeble cripples! How had we come to this sorry state, myself lost continually in the no-thoughts of plants, Amy hooked on cell-burning? How – ?

The first time I saw Amy Sanjour naked was as a patient, back on Earth. She had waltzed into my biosculpt clinic, the perfect image of a flighty hypochondriac with the money to indulge herself in a general somatic toning under my capable – and, I admit now, eager – hands. I was utterly taken in by her.

What I didn't learn until much later – when she had successfully jiggered and boobytrapped all my PK talents, nearly resulting in my causing the permanent disfigurement of one of my other patients – was that she was as much a peeker as I. No lowly skintwister, she had had a flourishing practice in neuropathology, treating Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and the like.

This practice she had abandoned upon the death of her sister – a death I arguably could have prevented.

She had come after me for revenge.

When I confronted her with what I had learned, a fight ensued. More than a fight. A psychic battle fought on the alternating terrains of our two bodies, a war waged in veins and cells, organs and bones.

We had stopped short of killing each other – not out of compassion, but inability. Our skills were too evenly matched to allow either one to gain a permanent advantage.

So there we stood in Amy's private room at the clinic, out of our mental clinch, bleeding, contused, puffy-faced, with snapped bones. Already our capable bodies were automatically healing themselves. That left only the intractable problem of our relationship to solve.

I could sense that Amy shared some of the embarrassed remorse and uneasiness I felt. In the space of a few long minutes, we had probed each other so deeply, come to share such a perverse kind of physical intimacy, that there was almost nothing left to say.

But in the end, Amy did discover something that could be said.

"I don't forgive you – but maybe I can help."

I accepted that statement without quite knowing what it meant.

I soon found out.

That very night, when we were basically recovered from our physical wounds, we became lovers, completing our intimacy on the same bed where we had nearly killed each other. Our fucking – I can use only that term to describe the animality of the impulsive act – was a transposed extension of that earlier encounter.

At that time, I was already involved with another woman, a teacher named Jeanine. I had considered her the sexiest, most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

After that night, she came to mean nothing to me.

There was nothing to compare to sex with a fellow peeker. Throughout medical school, I had avoided the experience, out of a certain nervous reluctance to allow PK access to my body, and out of a sense of my peers as competitors, not friends. Beyond school – well, peekers were not that common, and I simply didn't have many social contacts with others of my kind. And I had never guessed that the sensations of having a partner freely roaming inside me, while making more conventional love, would be so intense.

Imagine ghostly feelers opening the taps of lust, stoking biological fires –

And of course, it didn't hurt that Amy was outwardly beautiful, a tall, powerful woman, taut as a cable on the Bering Strait Bridge.

After that night, things moved too quickly to stop, impelled by strong emotions, bereft of logic.

I stopped seeing Jeanine. It was a messy parting. Amy became a partner in my clinic. She moved into my apartment. For a few months, she was satisfied performing facial and bodily makeovers with me, milking the vain rich of their unearned dollars. Then she got greedy, and revealed an unbelievable scheme. I listened warily. I remember thinking that

the trauma of her sister's death and her aborted, transfigured schemes of revenge on me had completely erased any altruism or professional scruples she had once possessed.

And since I had never had any, and was hopelessly fixated on Amy, I went along with what she proposed.

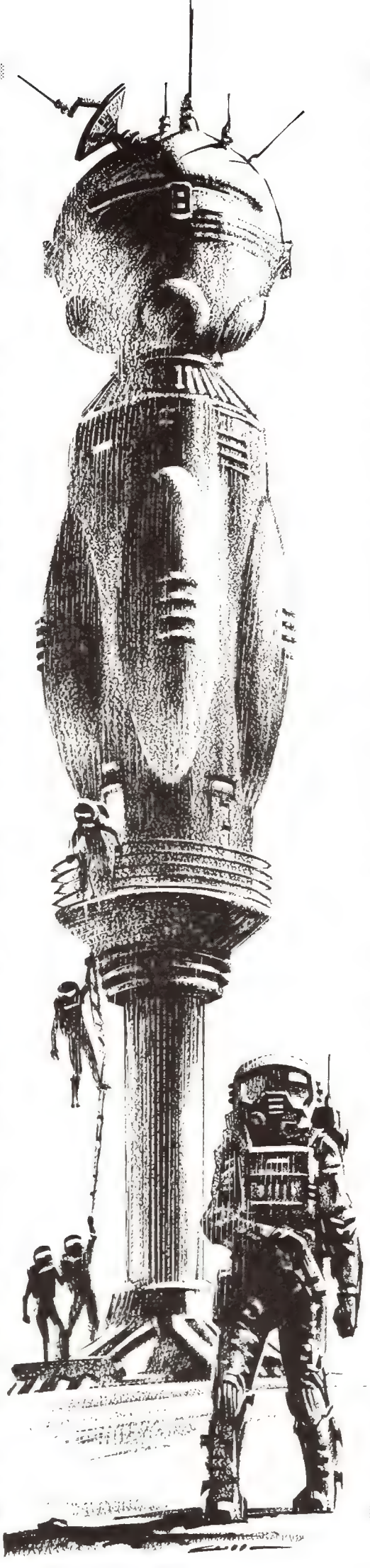
We waited for the perfect mark to approach us on his own, to allay suspicions later. He turned up in the form of a billionaire with several patents on room-temperature superconductors. With the build of a flabby flyweight, he was in the market for a new physique. Over the course of a few months, we gave it to him. Along with a time-delayed embolism. But before that fatal attack, triggered weeks after he left the clinic, we had already insured our share of his fortune. From his bed he had summoned his lawyer and richly endowed a foundation in our names, for the entirely plausible reason of being impressed with our mission to bring beauty to the world. Eyes open, lips moving, he had been unconscious the whole time. Amy, one hand unobtrusively on his shoulder, had manipulated his vocal cords like a puppetmaster. He was to have no memory of the event when he awoke.

On the day of the billionaire's death, when he still hadn't learned of his involuntary donation and attempted to rescind it, we were congratulating ourselves at home when the cops arrived. Suspicious relatives had requested a peeker autopsy, the only way our tampering could ever have been detected.

The trial went fast. We couldn't mount much of a defense. The prosecutor demanded that both of us get two consecutive terms of ninety-nine years each – which we probably could have served, given our superior homeostatic functioning.

It was at this point that the AMA stepped in. They couldn't stand the thought of two ex-peekers sitting out all that time in jail. Every five years a "do-you-remember?" story in the media, continual bad publicity for the whole profession... So they arranged in behind-the-scenes negotiations a 'more clement' sentence, one that would get us off the stage of public opinion, and make it appear as if we were intent on absolving ourselves.

The first Mars colony was established as a unilateral enterprise by the Russians



in 1999, taking advantage of Earth's close orbital approach to that world. This was in the days before the Comity, the de facto alliance which – first delicately, tentatively, then more and more strongly – had grown out of glasnost, and the sloughing off of Eastern Europe from the USSR. In those heady early Comity days of fading militarism and joint ventures, all attention had been turned toward remaking the Earth into a better world. The Mars colony had somehow been neglected, struggling along for fifty years as an archaic remnant of Russian aloofness.

Then, in a freakish but ultimately predictable cataclysm, the colony had been wiped out. A small vagrant asteroid had impacted nearly atop it.

Suddenly the world was unanimous in the need and desire to rebuild the base. What everyone had ignored became the only topic of conversation. Society could afford to turn its attention outward now, after half a century of peace and progress.

The Comity colony had been established for two years when our sentencing became an issue. Support for the base was still as strong as ever.

The colony's resident doctor had just died in a climbing accident on the slopes of the Tharsis Ridge. (Even a peeker can't recover from a crushed skull.)

We were nominated his successors. Transportees, exiles, penitent prisoners in the service of humanity.

They shot us up with anti-gee drugs and shot us off on the next supply mission. We had peeker-planted blocks on our powers that wouldn't dissolve until after a fixed number of metabolic reactions, equal to the length of the trip.

But once on Mars, there was no way they could really make us serve.

I was down on my knees by the bed, the crowd clustered at the door behind me forgotten. My hands hovered above Amy's bare midriff, shaking a bit, hesitant. Her abdominal muscle tone was shot to shit. My nails were longish and dirty. Christ... Where was Amy's former superb tonus, where were the manicured hands of the self-important Doctor Strode, which had stroked and reshaped the bodies of wealthy socialites?

Ready to dive beneath Amy's skin, I was halted by an unusual compunction. Did I have any right to drag her back from her destructive pleasures? What else was left to us, the untouchables of the colony? We'd never fit in, the only coerced laborers among all these committed, idealistic volunteers.

Well, hell – when you came down to it, what did rights count for? The only thing that mattered now was that I didn't want to spend the rest of my life alone among these fresh-faced zealots.

I slapped palms to flesh and went under, for a stroll down blood lane, through the gardens of organs and bone.

The stupid bitch had set up roadblocks for me, just like the last time. But she had been in a hurry to get burning, and had been sloppy. Plus her talents were suffering because of her addiction. She lacked some of the deftness now that had almost killed me during our first fight, so long ago.

I got past the buzzing lime-colored clots and the angry fibrillary nets, shot through the blood-brain barrier, and was in her hypothalamus before she could arouse herself to stop me.

She had that organ locked in total production of jazzed-up enkephalins and endorphins. These opiate-like substances were flooding the receptors in her brain and spine to produce a heavenly buzz, poppy-sweet. Trouble was, both the originating and receiving cells were burning themselves out, all metabolic resources allocated to the output and uptake of the pleasure-juices. She was killing off these and adjacent cells at an alarming rate.

I intervened in her cortical juryrigging and got the cells back to normal. Then I inititated some hasty regenerative processes. Brain cells, of course, resisted regeneration more than any other part of the body, and I was hard-pressed to force them to obey. Someday Amy would overextend the natural resiliency of her cells, and suffer permanent brain damage. That day, I sensed, was not far off.

Then I pulled out.

I could have woken her up from inside.

But I wanted the pleasure of doing it the old-fashioned way.

Back in my own shell, I slapped her four or five times across the face with stinging force.

Suddenly she shot up in bed and grabbed my wrist. I braced for her to enter me with her talent, but she applied only physical pressure, strong enough at that. I had to give her credit for a quick recovery. But then again, she had had the best peeker on the planet inside her.

"Stop it," she hissed, her olive eyes large.

"Tell me you don't love it."

"You fucking bastard."

I broke her grip and stood up. "Time enough for sweet nothings later, dearest. We've got an audience, in case you've been too busy melting your skull to notice." The watching young faces reddened and turned away. These kids were so easy to shock. "Put some clothes on – unless you consider yourself dressed – and meet me by the lock. We've got incoming trouble of some sort."

I left her getting shakily out of bed.

The crowd dispersed uneasily, remembering their duties. I was left with Fourier, who seemed to have been delegated my keeper. Her youthful innocence appeared untouched by the recent pitiful performance, and she seemed genuinely sorry for both Amy and me. Without meaning to be, I felt myself affected, softened, by her attitude. Then I realized that this was what someone – undoubtedly Holtzmann – had wanted to happen. Ah, he was a sly boy, that one. I updated my mental note never to underestimate him.

We walked through several domes, toward the garage with its lock.

"Any more news?" I asked.

"No. There was just that one radio contact, then nothing."

"What's the ETA?"

"Half an hour from now."

"Nothing we can do but wait, I guess."

She lifted her shoulders slightly, as if to calmly say, *One cannot act without information.* Jesus, these kids might be easily embarrassed by emotional scenes, but they were cool as clams in a crisis. I tried to remember if I had ever been that young and self-assured. But I couldn't make any contact with that past self – the lines were down, the distance insuperable – so I gave up.

Halfway through the wait, Amy joined us at the lock.

She emerged from between the parked crawlers, striding strongly, dressed in green. Her skin shone from a sonic cleansing. Disregarding regs, she had washed her short platinum hair with a week's personal allotment of cactus water, which always seemed to leave it thick and shining. Her features were alert, signs of her formidable intelligence written plain across them. I felt a sharp pang. She looked so right, so familiar, so lost –

"What's up?" she demanded.

I told her what I knew. She nodded sagely, all business. We went back to waiting.

Fourier saw the POGO appear first, and directed our attention to it. For a second it stood atop the northern rim like a Masai warrior on one leg, or a sleeping stork. Then it bounced up and over, and begin to descend the long slope in puffs of dust.

The Comity base was situated in the middle of the bottom of the Valles Marineris, that wide, continent-long rift on the Martian equator. Partly, the decision to plant the colony there was psychological, a reaction to the destruction of the first base. The valley seemed somehow to offer more shelter than the barren plains – although another determined asteroid would have no trouble fitting into the thirty-seven-mile-wide cleft. Partly, the decision reflected long-range plans. The eventual goal was to roof over the entire valley, section by section, and establish a shirt-sleeve environment. Lots of living space for the bucks, and a damn sight cheaper than terraforming the whole world.

Other colonists had come to the garage to help, although no one knew precisely what would be required. The POGO bounced closer and closer, eventually stopping about fifty feet away from the dome. It was too big to enter through the crawler lock. Its passengers would have to disembark and walk. If they still could.

A hatch opened in the stilted pod. A ladder of plastic chains unfurled.

I didn't know what to expect. Victims of decompression or explosion or rockfall, limbs torn or puffy or mangled, carried out by limping survivors –

The last thing I expected was to see five agile figures drop down the ladder, jumping off while still ten feet above the red soil, and begin trotting for the dome.

They entered the lock and were lost from our sight.

The speaker above the inner door came alive while the lock was cycling.

"Clear everyone out except the medical personnel," said Holtzmann's officious voice, a trace of nervousness underneath. "Have cots set up in the chipfab clean room. We're going to use it as an isolation chamber. We'll reach it by Alleys Eight and Twelve. After we've passed, have the whole route disinfected. We've just sterilized our suits, and won't be cracking them, but we can't take any chances."

I punched the intercom button. "Holtzmann, are you crazy? You're talking like you're infected. You know as well as I do that except for whatever imported terrestial organisms might have escaped and survived, Mars is dead."

There was silence for a long ten seconds. Then Holtzmann said, "Not any more, Doctor Strode. Not any more."

Weddig Holtzmann was thirteen years old. He had sharp Teutonic features and a blond brushcut. An East German, he was the product of their super-accelerated neurotropin education. I had never agreed with those who claimed those miracle catalysts allowed everything an adult needed in terms of sheer knowledge to be force-fed to someone by the time he was only thirteen. I was relieved when Congress – despite the pressure from the Gerontocrats, who wanted plenty of young workers to support them – killed the bill to lower the US's franchise to that age.

Fifteen was just right; those extra two years made a big difference. I know that I myself wouldn't have been ready for college at thirteen. As it was, by the time I emerged from Johns Hopkins and the Banneker Institute, at age twenty, I was hardly mature enough to handle my powers. As can be adduced by the way I've fucked my life up.

Now, at thirty-one, I felt practically ancient next to Holtzmann and his peers. I knew Amy shared these feelings, for we had spoken of it, in our more rational moments, as one of the causes of our sense of alienation.

Holtzmann, whether as a byproduct of his hothouse growth or due to congenital tendencies, was a perfect little martinet. No doubt one of the reasons he had been chosen as leader. I always called him "Weegee," because it pissed him off.

Standing now in the makeshift isolation chamber with Holtzmann, Amy and the other expedition members, I considered foregoing the jibe today.

There were no conventional handweapons on the base. They would have done little good against the one real threat of asteroids, and nations at peace had seen no need to arm their representatives against each other. But Holtz mann had remembered the flare-pistol aboard the POGO, and he now had its ugly wide snout pointed squarely at my gut. Its self-propelled, oxy-fed load would punch a hole in me that no amount of peeker skills would be able to rebuild.

"You're going to find out what's wrong with us," said Holtzmann sternly, an almost imperceptible quaver under his words, "and fix it. And this time there'll be no tricks."

I had to smile then at the memory. He was referring to the last time everyone had come to us for a bone-toning. In the lower gravity of Mars, minor osteoporosis was a problem, and we had regular sessions were we dealt with it, as well as searching out incipient skin cancers due to Mars' high UV. This time, out of boredom and disgust with our roles as captive shamans, Amy and I had added a little fillip to the treatment.

The morning after, all the colonists had woken up bald, their hair bestrewing their pillows. The uproar was wonderful. Things had taken months to get back to normal.

And the best part was, they couldn't even really discipline us, needing us as they did.

I carefully considered Holtzmann's emotional state, the muzzle aimed at me, and my integrity, then said, "Whatever you want – Weegee."

Holtzmann's finger tightened visibly on the trigger, I made ready to fling myself aside – and Amy stepped between us.

"Listen, so far we're totally in the dark. What's wrong with the five of you? You look okay. What happened?"

Holtzmann passed the back of his free hand across his sweaty brow and made a visible effort to calm down. "You're right, Doctor Sanjour. I've been remiss. I should have explained everything over the radio, and made the arrangements for the antiseptic precautions ahead of time. But we were all too preoccupied in running what tests we could. You know that Kenner doubles as our biologist." Holtzmann indicated a dark-haired seventeen-year-old sitting on a cot, hands folded morosely in his lap. "Well, he's been unable to learn anything about what's gotten into us."

Seeing our puzzlement, Holtzmann backtracked.

"You know we were making the first real survey of the ruins of the original base, at Pavonis Mons, to see if there could possibly be anything salvageable, or any surviving personal effects for the relatives of the colonists. Also, we wanted pieces of the asteroid that wiped out the base, since we seldom get a chance to study such objects uncontaminated by terrestial organisms.

"Well, the first part of our mission was fruitless. The base was entirely destroyed by the shock waves of the strike, which must have been measurable in megatons. The inhabitants, I'm sure, died almost instantly, as painlessly as possible. There were no artifacts left.

"However, we did succeed in finding portions of the asteroid itself. They're in the POGO now."

Holtzmann paused. "Oh, Christ, did I say not to let anyone near the POGO?" He walked to the wall and issued the order over the base's PA. My stomach muscles – which I hadn't even known were tight – relaxed.

Still slumped by the curving wall, Holtzmann turned back to us, raising the gun almost absentmindedly.

"We kept most of the samples in isolation, so as not to contaminate them. But one piece – one small piece – we handled with our bare hands, all of us marvelling, I think, at the distant origins of this innocuous rock, and how it was fated to wipe out so many lives. And now, God knows, it appears ready to do more destruction."

Amy said slowly, "You believe that you've been infected by an organism from the asteroid fragment – ?"

"It's not that implausible, Amy," I interrupted. "We know that interstellar clouds seem to contain free-floating amino acids. And those famous Antarctic

meteorites on Earth appeared to have prebiotic molecules on them. There was even a theory – the guy's name was Doyle, Hoyle, something similar – that the late-twentieth century epidemics were caused by extraterrestial microbial agents."

Holtzmann jerked erect, gun quivering. "There's no need to debate so coolly, people. We're compromised. Our bodies are hosts now to something unknown. There is no doubt, no doubt whatsoever."

"Well," I said, almost tauntingly, not quite willing to believe yet, "what are the symptoms, Weegee?"

Holtzmann's hand shot to the chest-seam of the coverall he had worn beneath his discarded pressure-suit. He ripped the fabric away from himself. Velcro peeled apart with an insulting noise.

infolded and recomplicated, gleaming slickly, throwing back highlights from the room's illuminants. They differed slightly, one from the other, like individual faces.

Holtzmann seemed a garden of exotic blooms, his body cultivated soil.

"There are more on the parts of me still covered," he said, "although their numbers have stopped increasing. Luckily, we are still able to sit and walk, although lying on them is – uncomfortable."

Amy and I both raised our hands in unconscious synchronization, and made ready to enter him.

"No," warned Holtzmann, gesturing with the gun. "Treat the others first. I'll go last."

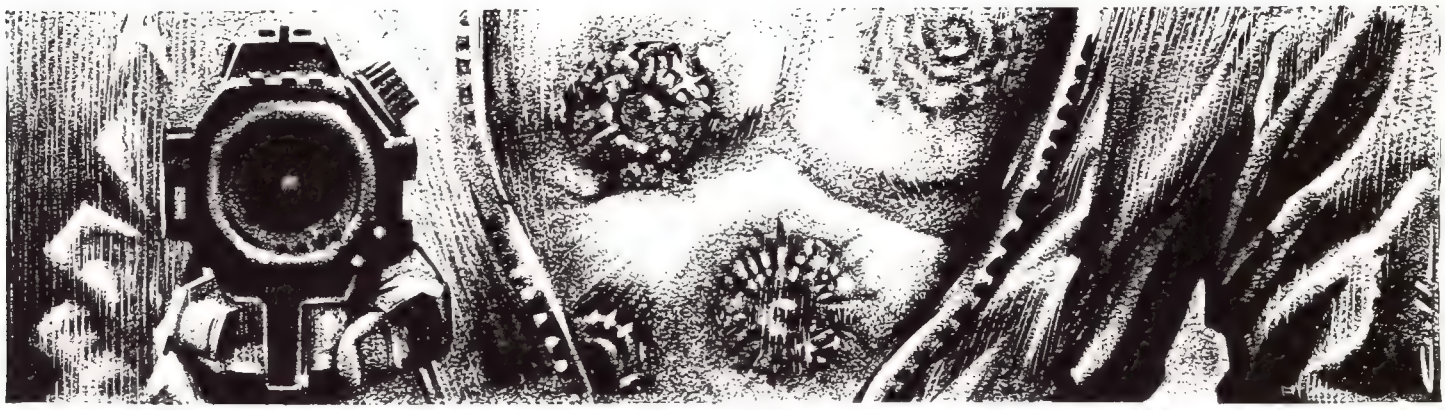
It was impossible to tell if he spoke

levels of antigens, no pockets of invaders hiding inside macrophages or T-cells. Kenner's psychic aura was one of utter health, tallying with his lack of debilitating symptoms.

Alien tropisms, alien lifecycles, meant alien patterns of conquest, I thought to myself.

I had been avoiding the obvious locales of the invaders, the fleshflowers themselves. Now, stymied elsewhere, I moved my perceptions cautiously toward them.

There were outriders to the colonized territory: sentry organisms, far from the main concentrations, whose like I had never before encountered. I tried to pin them down for examination, but they squirmed out of my mental pincers. Trapped in some Heisenbergian quan-



There are colors, shades and hues, which human flesh does not normally wear – at least not on the surface. The yellow-brown of rotten bananas. The mottled purple of bruised plums. The green-tinged grey of wet sharkskin. Yet these were the colors visible in the intricate shiny folds and convolutions of the growths bursting from Holtzmann's chest and abdomen.

I was next to the man before I knew I had moved. Amy too. We didn't touch him at first, but only stared.

Each growth was only about as big as an infant's fist, and there were only seven of them, irregularly spaced. It was their startling incongruity that had made them at first appear to dominate his body, from across the room. They emerged subtly from his skin, the alien colors, textures, and shapes grading away into normal skin.

Their shapes – consider brain coral, roses, ranunculus, anything complexly

from sense of duty, or fear. But it didn't matter, since we had to obey in either case.

The others had opened their coveralls down to their waists, after their commander's example, as if to offer mute testimony to their common affliction. One of the two women had symmetrical fleshflowers on both breasts, where her nipples had been. A man sprouted one from his armpit. I felt my own skin crawl.

Amy moved to delve into one of the women. I went to Kenner, sitting on the cot.

In and down, down, down, past his ephemeral agonized epidermis, into the arteries and cells and meat.

I had expected to spot signs of the infectious agent everywhere. I was disappointed. It had to be something like a virus, I was assuming, but the man's bright blood was clean of any such deadly packets. There weren't even any raised

dary, I could not both hold them and pick them apart.

I have used my PK talents on everything from mosquitos to man, microbes to elephants. The Mars colony's cacti presented no resistance to my skills. But all life on earth stems from a common ancestor, has a shared biochemistry. These things were the product of some completely alien course of evolution, with different mechanisms of life.

While I was planning my next move, the organisms counterpunched.

I never got anywhere near the main flowering bodies. Somehow, in an inconceivable manner, I was repelled, my advance thwarted. I got a fleeting impression of masses of single-celled viroids, alien genetic material coiled snakelike in their nuclei, massing, breeding, preparing to fission –

Kicked violently out of Kenner, I opened my eyes. Amy was reeling back

from her patient, obviously dealt a similar defeat.

"Are you done?" Holtzmann demanded. "Did it work? Are they dead?"

I rubbed the stubble on my chin. I caught Amy's green eyes. I spoke.

"Uh, I think we've got them on the run ..."

That night Amy and I slept together for the first time in months. And I mean simply slept together, for our sexual encounters had always continued, even during our worst periods. We fell exhausted into her bed after a hasty meal and pointless discussion of what we had experienced.

Holtzmann had been reluctant to let us leave the clean room, after our exposure to their bodies. I convinced him of the truth, which was that we had not been infected. He had been forced to believe us, and let us go. There was nothing any of us could do right then but get some rest.

As I held Amy's sleep-slackened body from behind, my mind drifting aimlessly for the few minutes I took to fall asleep, I thought of all we had been, all we had become –

Then I dreamed.

Peekers don't dream.

As a side-effect of our training, we lose our dreamlife. A fully integrated subconscious both attends to superior autonomic functioning, and dispenses with the necessity of sorting through experience and filing it away as dreams.

The last time I had dreamed, it had been a nightmare, a vision of my hands rotting, indicative of my confusion at the time.

Tonight's started pleasant, but turned nightmare too.

Amy and I stood on Earth again, atop a high hill, covered with grass and tall multicolored flowers on waving stalks. There was a breeze, and sun on our faces. We held hands like children. We were happy again.

Then the flowers began to attack.

They whipped around our ankles and calves, growing upward to strangle us. We pulled and twisted, Amy screaming, myself howling, to no avail.

Suddenly, a pair of scissors appeared in Amy's hands. She tried clipping the flowers, but they writhed away.

"Hold them, Jack, hold them!"

I grabbed a stalk, immobilizing it; Amy snipped off the bud; the thing withered and died.

In a few moments we had destroyed them all.

We fell down to the soil. Our clothes were gone. We made love.

I awoke in the middle of the night with an erection which, for a change, I hadn't willed into being. Which I soon convinced similarly awakened Amy, using more gentleness than I had employed in a while, to help me with.

But even better, I had an idea that might help us. An idea that needed no explaining, for I had been under Amy's skin during the whole dream and she had impossibly shared it all.

The five infected colonists were miserable that morning, having hardly slept for fear and physical discomfort. Their eyes were pouched in shadows, their postures poor. They looked wilted – except for the glossy vitality of their fleshflowers.

Holtzmann glowered at us as we entered.

"Have you worked on the problem? Do you think you can rid us of this contagion?"

He was so anxious he forgot to threaten us with the flare-gun.

"Yes, we've got an approach we think might work. But first, I want you to consider something. What if we had killed off all the organisms yesterday?"

"I don't understand –"

"Weegee, you surprise me. This is a long-awaited event, man's first contact with an alien lifeform. Microscopic, I'll admit, but still, non-terrestial life! Don't you think the scientific community on Earth might be mildly interested in such a thing?"

Holtzmann nodded. "Of course, we'll send them samples of the asteroid –"

I had to convince him that what I was about to propose was the only solution. "How do you know they'll be able to culture it again? What if your bodies hold the only viable members of the lifeform? Do you want to take a chance on exterminating them forever?"

Holtzmann paled. "You're not suggesting that we just let it continue to breed in us, as if we were lab animals ..."

Amy broke in. "No, we'll take the bug. We should be able to keep it alive in ourselves, while holding the manifestations down."

"On conditions," I added. "Return passage to Earth, of course. And a complete pardon. Or else we'll let you and the others just bloom until you can't move. And believe us, they're ready for a replicatory burst. We both saw it yesterday."

Holtzmann fingered the gun on the cot beside him, hesitating.

"C'mon, Weegee, face it, it's a great deal. You can kill us, but you can't force us to cure you. But if we get what we want, you all walk out healthy. And you'll have a legitimate reason to replace us with a peeker who's here because he believes in what you're doing."

Holtzmann sat rigid for a minute before speaking. "If you succeed –"

"Oh, we will," I answered with more confidence than I felt. "I take it we have a deal."

He was too mad to speak, and could only shake his head.

"I assume you still want to be last," I told him, just to twist the knife a little. In front of the others, he couldn't deny it.

Amy and I moved to one of the women. We both placed our hands on her shoulders.

Then we were inside her, working as a team, merging our skills.

This time we shot straight to the stems of the fleshflowers.

For a moment, sharing this patient with Amy, I felt exposed, as I did standing unsuited on the Martian surface. Amy could commit any treachery now, attack me through the channel of our mutual patient. Would our truce hold? Was it real?

It dawned upon me that she must be having the same doubts.

Then I didn't have time to worry any more.

The first sentries awaited.

Just as in my – our – dream, I pinned the first organism down immobile, and

Amy lysed its cell-wall.

Novel organelles, unlike anything on Earth, spilled out, trailing rainbow sparks, dying without their cytoplasmic support. I could leave them for the body's macrophages. I dove into the free-floating nucleus and unspooled its genetic material. The bases were strange, strange, and it was coiled right-handed, the opposite of all earthly DNA. No wonder it had thrown us. Amy and I studied it for a timeless interval. This look was all we had needed.

Now we could kill. Alone, or together.

We shot through all the nodes of unhealthy, warped flesh, slaughtering invaders by the thousands. We left their carcasses behind us, peeking regenerative changes in the humans that would soon erase all traces of the fleshflowers.

When we were done with the first woman, we moved on to one of the men.

Despite being able to kill the virus separately now, we tackled him and the others together.

It just felt good.

Finally, we had only Holtzmann left.

In the heat of the crisis yesterday, if Holtzmann hadn't stopped us when we instinctively moved to probe him jointly, he probably would have been cured by now. But he had, and we had tackled the viroids separately, and we had failed. And had enough time to conceive our little blackmail scheme.

He seemed to realize this now, and the knowledge rankled. But he was at our mercy.

Amy and I laid our curative hands right atop four of his blossoms. It was the first time we had touched them. They felt cold and hard, like certain fungi.

"Let's do it," I said.

It took no time at all to exterminate Holtzmann's unwanted guests. All except for a few in the colonies beneath our hands.

At the proper moment we split our flesh, opened up bloodless wounds in our palms, and also in Holtzmann's fleshflowers. We drove the remaining alien viroids up into our stigmata, and closed the exit.

It was just like slaughtering Indians, and corralling the surviving few on a reservation. What man had always excelled at.

We came back to ourselves.

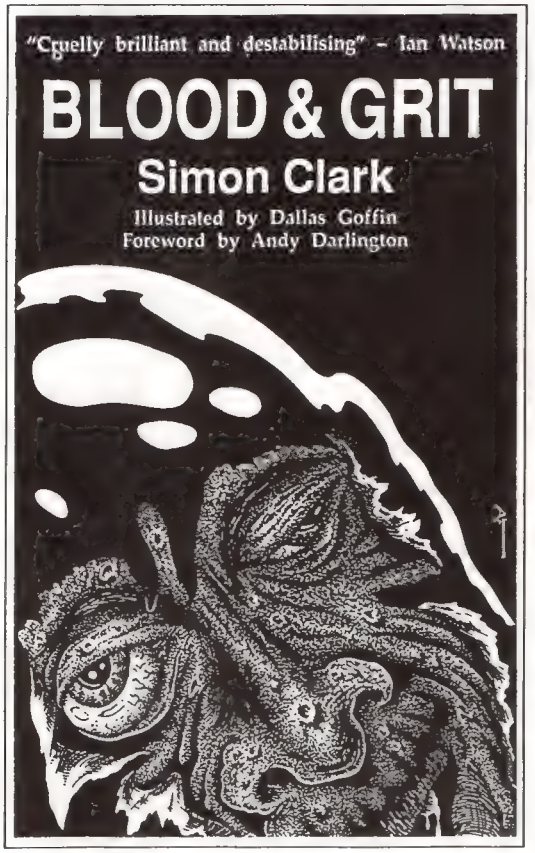
Holtzmann spoke.

"It's over," he said with relief.

"For you," said Amy.

"But for us," I said, "it seems to have just begun." ❑

Paul Di Filippo was born the year Elvis cut his first record. He began reading SF when the Beatles appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show. He sold his first story the year the Clash released "London's Burning." Currently, he supplements his writing income with a job in a university bookstore, where he modestly sells volumes containing his own stories with nary a word of self-advertisement.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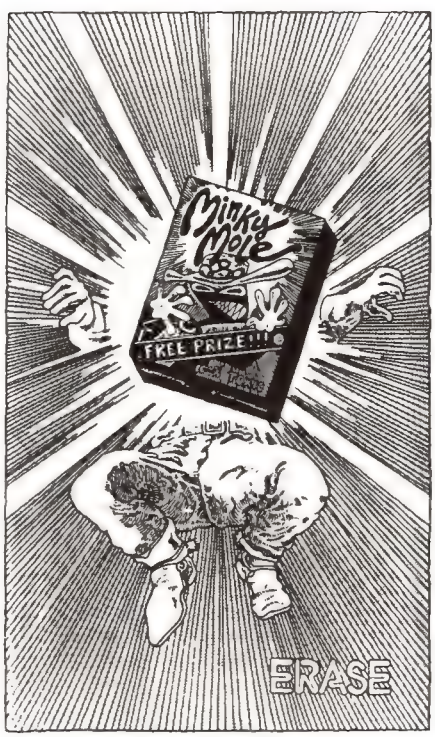
Roller coaster

ALLIGATOR ALLEY by Mink Mole & Dr Adder

299pp, £13:95 from Morrigan Publications, 26 St Paul's Drive, Scotforth, Lancaster, LA1 4SR. ISBN 1 870338 60 X.

This is a weird, weird book. Mink Mole and Don Coyote are High Grade Manimals, genetically cooked up by Dr Incubus for the Dept of Defence. The novel starts with them speeding through Florida to get to the Bud Dwyer Memorial Video Festival, leaving a trail of carnage in their wake. Any further attempt to summarise the plot would be futile – just as you think you've got it sussed, it spins 180° and heads off in the opposite direction.

Most of the novel is narrated by Mink Mole and, given that he is clinically psychotic, this guarantees a unique viewpoint. Dr Adder occasionally takes over, giving us a contrasting, slicker style (remarkably similar to one K.W. Jeter's ...)



Alligator Alley also breaks new ground in bad taste humour. If you can stomach it, then this will be one of the funniest things that you'll read this decade. Okay, so you may have heard one or two of the jokes before – bet you never thought that anyone would be mad enough to put them in print, though.

Whoever did the typesetting deserves a kick in the head, but overall Morrigan has delivered an extremely nice package, and Ferret's many illustrations are a delight. There is also a special signed (!) edition retailing for £45, which also gives you a soundtrack cassette and T-shirt. But why's there no sign of a paperback? Something this good deserves a mass market.

In the meantime, buy this novel. You deserve it.

Jim Steel ❑

Illustration by Ferret and/or Don Coyote from *Alligator Alley*

THE HORMONE JUNGLE by Robert Reed

Orbit, ISBN 0 7088 8327 3.
300pp, £3:50.

Set in the steamy equatorial city of Brule, two thousand years into our future *The Hormone Jungle* follows its two main protagonists, Chiffon, an android courtesan, and Steward, a free-lance bodyguard and 'security adviser' from the mystic Freestates, through the rich and fascinating world Robert Reed has created. Chiffon has escaped from her evil crimelord owner/master, taking with her some highly valuable microchips, and engages Steward's help to avoid capture. The plot is simple enough, centring on the efforts of Dirk, the unfortunately named crimelord in question, to re-gain his property, and of Steward, a descendant of the original Amerindians who was brought up on a diet of pain and suffering in the Freestates, where wars have been continually fought for hundreds of years without any deaths, to thwart Dirk's efforts.

The magic of *The Hormone Jungle* is twofold. Firstly it lies in the complex, alluring and colourful world of the future that Mr Reed has created, which whilst being in many ways fantastic manages always to remain believable. It is a world where man can shape both his environment and his offspring exactly, where he can create a genetically perfect lover for himself, where all the accumulated knowledge and experience of ages is available to all and sundry through the 'World-Net', where artificial intelligences are used for everything from the running of the city taxi service to keeping alive the dearly departed in 'Ghost' from in electronically created worlds of crystal illusion (incidentally the first to attempt this strange afterlife were the Popes). This book is packed with clever insights, some funny and some collossally sad, all thought-provoking, into the implications of such a world of artificial intelligences when it is peopled, as it is, with characters powerfully human.

Robert Reed's strong and skillful characterisation is the second magical element of this book. Many writers fail dismally when, having gone to great lengths to create a strong and interesting setting for their characters, they then produce inhabitants for their worlds who are lifeless and two-dimensional. Not so Mr Reed, whose characters are never found to be lacking in any respect, from the main characters all the way to those with only a minor role to play.

Robert Reed is, according to the cover of this edition, "a major stylist", and with that I am inclined to agree, as his prose is powerful yet succinct, weaving his characters into the texture of their world with consummate skill.

This review may seem over the top in its praise of Robert Reed's creation, but if you really want to know why *The Hormone Jungle* is a damned good read, and why it passed so quickly from my 'books I must read' pile to my 'books I must read *again*' pile, then go out and buy a copy. For the price of just three pints of Guinness, you could do a lot worse.

Chris Whitmore ❑

CROWN OF STARS
by James Tiptree Jr.

Orbit, ISBN 0 7474 0471 2.
340pp, £3:99.

Ten stories comprise this posthumous collection by Alice Sheldon, who achieved popularity and acclaim under the pen-name of James Tiptree, Jr. Although there is no indication which part of her career the stories come from, nine of the ten first saw publication between 1985 and 1988.

Even so, there is already a dated feel to some of the stories, with references to nukes and commies making "Second Going" in particular unbelievable as a near-future scenario. "Yanqui Doodle", a Vietnam-style account of a GI in a Central American combat zone, also seems somewhat passé.

Sheldon puts great effort into describing the societies her characters live in, so much so that at times her work reads more like a social documentary than a story. Thirty of the forty pages of "Yanqui Doodle" is a blow-by-blow account of the GI's cold-turkey from combat amphetamines; "Second Going" describes the effects on society of man's encounter with aliens whose spaceships contain the Gods themselves; the lifestyle of the rich seventy years hence is painstakingly painted in "Backward, Turn Backward".

As a result, the characters themselves are often shallow, almost incidental. The pattern of their lives is shaped by their surroundings, rather than letting the plot

Dark future

ARMAGEDDON CRAZY
by Mick Farren

Orbit, ISBN 0 7474 0470 4. 282pp, £3:50

A former Deviant and founder of the Pink Fairies, Mick Farren gave up rock'n'roll and turned his hand to journalism with the underground paper *IT* for two years, before publishing his first SF novel, *The Texts of Festival*, in 1973.

Seventeen years and four books later, Farren brings us his latest work, *Armageddon Crazy*. In this near-future thriller, television evangelist Larry Faithful sweeps to power in the wake of economic crash and end-of-millenium panic, on the simple manifesto that he'd get Jesus to intervene and stop the rot. Censorship closes in as antiabortion, heresy and blasphemy laws are pushed through Congress, so that within three years the United States has become as fully-fledged a religious police state as Iran under the Ayatollahs.

Into this chilling scenario Farren places a number of characters central to the plot. Lt Harry Carlisle, a world-weary New York street cop whose wife was sent to the concentration camps a year earlier, and whose work frequently conflicts with that of the deacons, a form of religious secret police; Deacon Winters, a repressed small-town kid who has recently enlisted in the deacons in the dream of bringing heretics and terrorists to justice; Cynthia Kline, planted as a sleeper in the deacons' clerical auxiliary by the terrorist organisation under investigation by both Carlisle and Winters; Charlie Mansard, a former arena rock concert lighting roadie, who is now a special effects wizard creating spectacular holographics for the big-time evangelists; and Arlen Proverb, a non-conformist fire-and-brimstone preacher, popular with the unemployed and discontent and barely tolerated by the authorities.

And they are all tools in the hands of the enigmatic fop Matthew Dreisler, head of Deacon Internal Affairs and, as the deacons' chief headhunter, possibly the most feared man in all of New York, as he manipulates the downfall of President Larry Faithful.

The biographical blurb describes Farren as "a hopelessly unreconstructed side effect of the late sixties and seventies who ... continues to play rock'n'roll in the saloons of New York, drinks too much, wears a lot of black, and still harbors a desire to be rich and famous before his excesses catch up with him." Whilst he is shrewd enough not to let his storytelling descend to such base rock'n'roll cliché, he does rely on certain stereotype images as a means of efficient communication with the reader.

Harry Carlisle, the disaffected cop, for example, bears a remarkable likeness to Clint Eastwood's character of the same name, to the extent of blowing away two junkies holding up the bar where he enjoys a quiet off-duty drink. The obscure terrorist organisation he's hunting, the Lefthand Path, is evocative of the central American group Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path); the ineptitude of Deacon Winters in his attempts to take control of his career is prefigured by his Christian name being Bernie, like the British variety comedian. In each case, Farren exploits the reader's existing reactions to certain stereotypes to set up the framework of the novel more economically and get on with the story that much faster.

Where Farren's rock'n'roll mentality can be seen is in the strong sensitivity to subculture that underlies the narrative. This ranges from obvious sympathy to the consumption of alcohol in a near-prohibition environment, to the trading of Motorhead records on the black market. Even in the most hostile conditions, Farren seems to say, rock'n'roll will still live on. At its most explicit in the novel, it is the prominence of Elvis Presley followers – the Elvi – as a non-Christian sub-cult who turn out in droves to Arlen Proverb's shows, with their scarves and badges, sideburns and sunglasses.

Couple this with a rich vein of humour, of rock'n'roll cynicism towards establishment values and religion in particular. I think of a self-righteous American attitude to Eye-ran, of "That could *ne*-ver happen *here*". Oh yes it can, bud, and it's right under your nose.

The lasting joy of *Armageddon Crazy* is that Farren seems like he's *enjoying* himself. He writes with the ease of a back-room r'n'b pub band, technically perfect and economical in style, content to enjoy their craft and have a few beers and a laugh with the punters. ❑

evolve around their actions and crises. So much description slows down the pace of narration almost to a standstill, leaving the impression that these stories would not suffer for being half their published length.

There *are* stories in a more economical style, and the benefit is immediately obvious. "Last Night and Every Night", at four pages by far the shortest in the collection, is a tense and tightly crafted lowlife snapshot of homeless girls being lured to some dark and gruesome but undisclosed fate (prostitution? snuff movie victim?).

The pimp and his colleagues are revealed at the end of "Last Night" to be undead, forced into these activities by some higher and more powerful being. If there is a theme to the stories in this collection, it is stated most explicitly here: the pimp has no control over his life and his environment, and can only react to events instead of shaping them.

The same is true of the outline characters in the 'documentary' stories; it happens again in "In Midst of Life", when a rich and influential businessman loses control of his life, commits suicide, and is recruited as a gopher for the hierarchy of an afterlife that looks no different from the real world he has just left behind.

In a broader sense, mankind is shown to be out of control of its environment in the scenes of social decay described with such clarity in "Morality Meat" and Backward", and in the dependence on drugs in "Yanqui Doodle" and on religion in "Second Going".

The morality and allegory become even explicit fable in "All This and Heaven Too", with its rival countries of Ecologia-Bella and Pluvio-Acida as the polarized extremes of the pollution and natural resources debate.

Somewhat surprisingly for a science fiction collection, it is the two horror stories which stand out from the rest. "Last Night" is perhaps the best in the book, but it is followed closely by "Morality Meat", also set in the near-future. Even here there is too much attention to sociology, but the story recovers well to build to a chilling climax. This in itself makes the story a pleasure to read, for most of the collection displays a serious weakness in the endings, being either twee ("Come Live with Me", "All This and Heaven Too"), predictable ("Yanqui Doodle") or moralizing ("Backward"), or a combination of all three.

At first glance, *Crown of Stars* promised a rich variety of topics and settings to entertain the most hardened of SF readers. Unfortunately, great ideas alone do not automatically make great stories; it is a great pity that the skill and craftsmanship which gained Alice Sheldon numerous Hugo and Nebula nominations is only glimpsed here.

The weaknesses of most of these stories give the impression of bottom-drawer leftovers, perhaps explaining why they had to wait for a posthumous collection. With such overtones of the commercial bandwagon, this book is sadly a must for completists only. ❑

THE FALL OF CHRONOPOLIS & COLLISION WITH CHRONOS
by Barrington J. Bayley

Pan, £3:99

Barrington J. Bayley is a name new to me, and Pan are promoting several of his older books by issuing them as double-novels which does make for extremely good value, considering the hefty cost of paperbacks now. Both books deal with the nature of Time, and use the 'space Opera' format in an off-beat way. Though adventure stories, they have a stark Orwellian air to them, and are set in fairly repressionist Human Empires that have taken racialism to the extreme. In both stories, these empires have conquered time travel, using it in militaristic ways that would make H.G. Wells squirm.

Though not directly linked, both books share similar societies, where a scientific elite control time and their empires - *Fall of Chronopolis* has vast armadas of time-travelling battleships slipping across the timestream, attacking their future (and past) selves, aliens and genetic mutants. In *Collision with Chronos*, time has been so warped and corrupted by man's control that it now faces itself in a paradox that threatens the existence of the universe – heavy stuff, eh?

The sheer scope of Bayley's imagination is both invigorating and confusing at times – let's face it, time *is* confusing. But there's little doubt that a talented author is at work here. Also published in double format – *Garments of Caen/Pillars of Eternity*, also at £3.99. Pan are to be congratulated in bringing these books out in such good value packages.

John Peters ❑

HUNTER'S MOON – A STORY OF FOXES
by Gary Kilworth

Unwin, ISBN 0 04 440615 0.
330pp, £3:99

After rabbits, badgers etc, it seems only natural that someone would get around to foxes eventually. This book is the story of O-ha's life, and that of her mates and cubs. It also tells of Man's explosion into the countryside, destroying the wildlife's habitat to create their own – one that some animals come to exploit themselves. In many ways, though an adventure story, the story is a damning one, showing how we have corrupted and destroyed rare wildlife – all in the name of progress. Hunters become scavengers, rooting in dustbins for food, rather than hunting as they have done since time immemorial.

To give the story pace, there is a vendetta between O-ha and Sabre, a ridgeback hound she has bested on more than one chase. These sections are quite chilling, as O-ha loses cubs and a mate to this adversary, and you come to realise that Sabre is totally mad, a product of intense breeding programmes.

Other pieces of the story fail to convince – the author gives some animals languages that sound very French, Italian and German in their construction. I also couldn't help thinking that at times I had Johnny Morris perched on my shoulder, whispering the story into my ear, using his inimitable range of voices to dramatise the dialogue – *Tales of the Riverbank-style.*

On the whole though, this is a very good book – thought-provoking. It doesn't gloss over life in the country, and while perhaps the anthropomorphism goes a little too far at times to be believable, the story still catches you up in its claws.

John Peters ❑

CYBERBOOKS
by Ben Bova

Mandarin, ISBN 0 7493 0131 7.
283pp, £3:50.

Cyberbooks is the tale of the invention of the world's first electronic book and its impact on the publishing industry. It is a couple of hours of harmless entertainment, good enough to fill in a rainy Sunday afternoon, but not really worthy of serious consideration. It takes some hefty swipes at the publishing game, with a modest degree of success, but with a target as large, lumbering and stupid as mass market publishing it would be fairly difficult to miss.

The plot is all too simple and yet still manages to lose itself, the style lightweight and often annoying in its Douglas Adams' wit, and the characters all flat and totally predictable. Having said that, it is readable and demands little from the reader in the process, and if you are the sort of person who thought *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* was pretty good, then you may well love it.

Personally I thought it was dreadful, but it did fill in one particularly boring Sunday afternoon. Cheers, Ben.

Chris Whitmore ❑

CONCATENATION #4

A4, 36pp, free for large SAE from Jonathan Cowie, 44 Brook Street, Erith, Kent DA8 1JQ.

Anyone who attended Eastcon in Liverpool last April or the Dutch Worldcon this August will no doubt have discovered this magazine already, as *Concatenation* is distributed freely at most large conventions.

It covers the whole range of science and science fiction, with articles on recent scientific developments of interest to the SF world, book, film and video reviews, and reports from conventions. The readers poll gives a fascinating insight into how SF fans relate to science fact, whilst Neil Gaiman ponders lost futures, and Kathy Gale, Senior Fiction Editor at Pan Books, explores the threat to the British book trade from conglomerate publishing and the potential breakdown of the Net Book Agreement.

Though not typeset, *Concatenation* is a slick and glossy production, with plenty of illustrations and photos, and sporting a full colour cover. With its wide range of topics and informed point of view, this is one convention freebie you'll want to hang on to. ❑

CRITICAL WAVE #14-17

A4, 28pp, £1:50 each (6/£5) from Critical Wave Publications, 24A Beech Road, Bowes Park, London N11 2DA

Anyone reading *Locus* or *SF Chronicle* might easily be left with the impression that SF only happens in the States, so for a magazine such as *Critical Wave* to be keeping track of the British end of the market is an immediate asset.

The magazine features extensive and well-informed coverage of news from publishers both big and small, reports on recent conventions and details of those forthcoming, a lively gossip column as well as the obligatory book, magazine and film reviews.

A bimonthly schedule, supplemented when necessary by broadsheet bulletins, means that news is rarely out of date, and *Critical Wave*'s independent position means there's no pandering to names according to size, simply praise where praise is due.

Topical matter is accompanied by larger features, including an appraisal of *The Pan Book of Horror Stories* (*Wave* #14), Andy Darlington's quest for sex in SF (#15), and Steve Sneyd's review of the early years of SF poetry (#16). Comics author turned novelist Chris Claremont is interviewed in the latest issue, which also carries an overlong essay on the possible future of video entertainment.

Recent issues have also seen *Critical Wave* aim for a heightened visual impact with regular art portfolios, by the award-winning Jim Porter in #16 and by German illustrator Michael Marrak coming up in #18.

Covering all aspects of SF and fantasy, from the hard business of big publishing through to the more lighthearted of fan activities, *Critical Wave* will be a useful and informative asset to anyone whose interest in SF is more than just passive. ❑

NIGHTFALL #1-2

A5, #1 40pp, #2 68pp, £1 each (£1:75 from #3, 3/£5) from Noel Hannan, 18 Lansdowne Road, Sydney, Crewe CW1 1JY

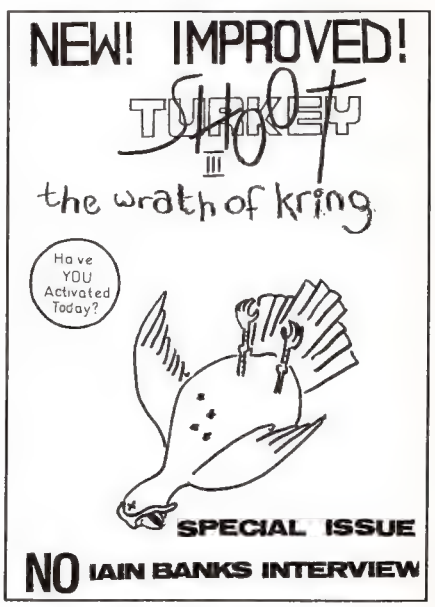
After an absence of six years from the small press circuit, Noel Hannan returns with a new magazine featuring "the best of today's small press writers and artists in

Staggers and reels

TURKEY SHOOT #2-3

A4, 16pp, free for large SAE from Ian Sales, 56 Southwell Road East, Mansfield, Notts NG21 0EW

Bemoaning the sorry state of commercial SF seems to be the trendy thing to do nowadays so, in the midst of such extensive contemplation of navels, to see someone actually taking up arms against the cheap trash is particularly galvanizing.



With tongue lodged firmly in cheek, and a healthy irreverence to the fore, the intrepid Ian Sales is a man with a *mission*. His target, to give obscure penny dreadfuls "their 'fifteen minutes' in the limelight, in the hope that others will be encouraged to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new sub-genres of science fiction ..."

Passing by the Silverbergs, Asimovs, Heinleins and Harrisons, eligible candidates are assessed on how well they exhibit the qualities of "little or no (obvious) characterization, a plot that staggers and reels from the inane to the bloody farcical, at least a dozen *deus ex machinae* per chapter, a favourite word that gets used every other sentence (there are bonus points if it's one only John Clute has been known to use ...), and an impressive lack of writing skills".

How well they shape up is to be found in the Kring Factor scale of 1 to 100, in honour of *Turkey Shoot*'s icon and inspiration Michael Kring (whose seminal turkey *The Space Mavericks* count for the full hundred).

Supporting the case for each novel's turkeyhood are swathes of 'Quotable Quotes', laden with redundant phrases and pointlessly overwritten descriptions to keep you chuckling all day. Standing out by a mile was Emil Petaja, whose *The Nets of Space* stonked home to win #2's Bernie Award with *"his cocked look sized her up"*, although *"Don's eyelids fell shut with a silent thud"* and *"the brassy September blue overhead had been obscured by invisible storm clouds"* deserve an honourable mention.

Issue #3 sees the magazine settling into its chosen mission in life, more smoothly presented with the quotes right after the novel critiques instead of in a separate section at the end, and the addition of spoof material to complement the broadside exposés.

The subtle *Journal Wired* and Iain Banks piss-takes on the cover are poor preparation for the critical piece "Recondite Rodomontades on Nocturnal Hobbledehoys" by one John Cute (sic), a masterpiece of thesaurus rhetoric that had me hooting with laughter.

Fandom might have a despicable reputation in the more serious SF circles, but this is one fanzine that transcends the barriers to make it essential and enjoyable reading for anyone who lays claim to a sense of humour. ❑

comic strip and text story format" from across the range of speculative and fantastic fiction.

Issue #1 is something of a prospectus issue, cranked out on a temperamental photocopier and featuring a mixture of new material and reprints from Noel's previous publishing exploits, the fanzines *Sandor* and *Stratosfear*. The older material is less satisfying though, being more reliant on pun than plot.

The exception is the long "Snowblind" strip, and early and previously unpublished collaboration between Noel Hannan and John Welding that poignantly charts the end of the friendship between Cornelius and his cyborg shuttle co-pilot.

New material comes in the form of two pieces by Steve Sneyd, the first a tale of how a jilted wife's revenge on her husband's sophisticated android sex toys goes horrifically wrong, and the second an atmospheric prose-poem of vampirism which is set off nicely by Dallas Goffin's spot art.

Whilst it may be said by some that the first issue of *Nightfall* falls short of its stated intent, #2 holds its own much better with more pages, an all-new lineup and far improved print quality. Dreyfus, Kevin Cullen and Alan Hunter join Dallas for the main art credits, supplying the visuals for the prose contributions of D.F. Lewis, Steve Sneyd, John S. Townsend and Nicholas Royle.

The knockout piece is wisely saved for last: Andy Darlington's "The Spacer Who Fell from Grace with Space and the Girl in the Golden Asteroid" is a splendidly image-laden account of asteroid ship-wreck that easily ranks as one of Andy's best ever stories.

Stateside collaborators Joseph Shea and Lon Roberts bring an international feel to the strips, but the highlight here is Kevin Cullen's rendition of Noel Hannan's script of "High Precision Ghosts".

This is where *Nightfall* really does score, for by giving artists like Cullen and Hunter – best known for their single illustrations – the chance to experiment with their art, the results can be truly stunning. I look forward to the promised Dallas Goffin and Dreyfus strips to Andy Darlington scripts promised for #3,

At a time when new magazines are folding even before the first issue through over enthusiasm, *Nightfall* seems to be treading a more cautious path. Building the magazine up a little at a time, the new price next issue brings the further development of a move up to A4, making *Nightfall* one of the most promising new magazines to have surfaced for a long time. ❑

STRANGE ADVENTURES #12-17

A4, 16pp, £1:10 each (12/£10) from Strange Adventures, 13 Hazely Combe, Arreton, Isle of Wight PO30 3AJ

Hailing from 'Fantasy Island' this monthly news and views fanzine covers the media side of SF, fantasy and horror.

The emphasis is very much on the latter, with extensive and exhaustive reviews of the latest video and big screen releases. Editor Tony Lee is assisted here by guest reviews such as Kevin Lyons and John Peters, and they give honest opinions on the bulk of the splatter output that's currently in vogue, but takes care to highlight the classier new productions such as Alejandro Jodorowsky's *Santa Sangre*.

There's news from behind the scenes, as well as book and magazine reviews. The recipe is completed by festival reports and critical articles on topic like deathgames and killersports, Disney favourites, and mad doctors in films.

Liberally laced with movie stills and Alan Hunter's artwork, the layout and production are ambitious but not quite clean enough to let the words take over. Where *Strange Adventures* does have the edge over its competitors is in the honesty of its approach, and its refusal to simply extend the ad-men's campaign through sensationalism. ❑

WORKS #6

A5, 52pp, £1:25 (£1:60 from #7, 4/£5:50) from the NSFA, or from Works, 12 Blakestones Road, Slaithwaite, Huddersfield HD7 5UQ

In terms of quality of content, nothing need be added to the review of *Works* #5 last issue. There's a similarly strong line up of short pieces by such notables as Chris Evans, Jeff VanderMeer and Andy Sawyer, as well as new arrivals like Alison Sinclair, Rick Cadger and Jim Steel.

Where the magazine has made a quantum leap forward is in the promised move up to full typeset design, which leaves the old dot-matrix standing. From the stipple-finish two-colour cover to the glossy inside pages, the overall product is so much cleaner and classier than before, although some of the artwork does seem to have lost its edge in the scanning process.

Purists will be pleased that the old format has not undergone drastic change, but has simply been upgraded. But that upgrading is such that those readers who have previously been put off *Works* by its visual appearance, now have no justification for passing it by. ❑

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STATESIDE

CHAMPAGNE HORROR

A4, 64pp, $7 from Champagne Productions, The Penthouse, #265 – 919C Albert Street, Regina, Saskatchewan S4R 2P7, Canada

A new magazine from Canada, with illustrator Cathy Buburuz at the helm, *Champagne Horror* features the work of writers and artists from Hungary, Yugoslavia, Italy and Austria, as well as from the USA and Canada.

In this premier issue, the fiction and poetry come entirely from North American writers. Whilst some of the stories are too short to satisfy fully, longer pieces by Tao Rae Tasmaine and the unnerving John-Ivan Palmer fit the bill nicely.

However, it is in the artwork department – where the overseas influence is at its strongest – that *Champagne Horror* truly shines. There are particularly classy contributions from America's Ree Young and Charles Dougherty, as well as Austrian Klaudia Weber and Hungarian Horvath Akos, who provides the superb dream-like illustrations for the front and back covers.

The emphasis of *Champagne Horror* seems to be on the more traditional elements of horror, though the magazine is not averse to a more lighthearted approach as evidenced by the delightfully tongue-in-cheek "Horrorscopes" and "Demented Nursery Rhymes".

Despite some patchiness, *Champagne Horror* has offered an interesting first issue, and looks set to follow in the tradition of Stateside horror small presses like *Grue* and *Nøctulpa*, its larger format complementing the paperback size of these better-established magazines. ❑

NEW PATHWAYS #16-17

A4, #16 68pp, #17 56pp, $4:50 each (6/$27) from New Pathways, c/o MGA Services, Box 863994, Plano, TX 75086-3994, USA (£2:75 each or 4/£10 from the NSFA)

Back after a brief layoff whilst strategies were redefined, *New Pathways* kicks back into gear with a new logo, bimonthly schedule and full colour covers.

These two issues were produced side-by-side to give editor Mike Adkisson a running start on the new schedule, and so it would be unfair to judge development of the new format by comparing between them; better instead to consider them as a two-part manifesto for the future of the magazine.

He certainly comes out with all guns firing. Fearing that the proliferation of desktop publishing is causing *New Pathways* to disappear into a mire of competitors, he sees these latest changes as the way to get ahead of the field and keep the magazine from fading into obscurity.

Yet he is perhaps too quick to rush to the magazine's defence. He accuses critics of the recent addition of film reviews to *New Pathways* of literary snobbishness towards Hollywood, yet displays the same snobbishness himself in his bitter dismissal of the convention community as "egocentric and isolated". He justifies the film section on the basis that "cinema is a highly evolved *artform*", not only in his editorial but repeatedly in comments to readers' letters, whilst simultaneously accusing SF fandom of a "chronic need to solicit peer support and ... feed their egos".

Merits of the cinema artform aside, the proliferation of glossy promo stills for films such as *The Hunt for Red October*, *Batman* and *Born on the Fourth of July* still remains totally out of character with the rest of *New Pathways*. Perhaps if lesser-known filmmakers such as Alyce Wittenstein were featured instead, the cinema section would slip more easily between the sheets of the magazine.

But these inconsistencies are more than compensated by the fiction *New Pathways* carries. From the tremendous guiding influence of Misha in the early issues, through Luke McGuff and now Chris Kelly, *NP*'s fiction editors have played a key role in establishing the magazine as the leader in its field, having done more than any other to promote those writers of quality who happen not to be compatible with the Establishment.

These two issues contain a mix of new names and old stalwarts of the magazine. In #16 there's fiction from Robert Frazier and Ardath Mayhar, a thoughtful piece by Lewis Shiner and short whimsy from Brian Aldiss. Highlight this issue is Don Webb's "The Martian Spring of Dr Woodard", quirky and revealing in typical Webb fashion. Steve Rasnic Tem and Jessica Amanda Salmonson kick off #17 backed up by Mark Rich and Andy Watson, peaking with Ronald Anthony Cross' "The Experiment", and "Cities in Dust", Richard Paul Russo's a stark vision of sex in the 21st century.

I must also mention "Briefing for an Assault on the Citadel", an excellent article in #16 by Richard Grant which, instead of simply moaning about the SF establishment, *actually tells you what to do about it.* Writers, critics, editors, fans and readers are all given the low-down on where they are going wrong, and most importantly, what they should be doing to put things right, making this essay essential reading for anyone who cares about SF.

Matt Howarth's "Sonic Curiosity" music review strips and Ferret's "Nuclear FX" continue to delight and amuse, whilst Adkisson's own "Entropy Comix" has been

dropped in favour of a new strip by Brad Foster called "Meta", certainly as good as anything you'll find in *Heavy Metal* or the more upmarket comic magazines.

As a long-standing supporter of *New Pathways*, I sorely hope that the improved visuals and more frequent schedule will give the necessary boost that Mike Adkisson is looking for. I understand how protective he feels to his baby, but if *New Pathways* is to remain "the original and still the best", he might be better letting let the magazine speak for itself rather than trying to bludgeon his new readership into submission. ❑

NØCTULPA #4

A5, 180pp paperback, $10 from George Hatch, PO Box 5175, Long Island City, NY 11105, USA

If you ever wondered what sort of thing Karl Edward Wagner is reading when he selects stories for *The Year's Best Horror*, then this is it. The stylish young pretender to *Grue*'s horror throne, *Nøctulpa* has rapidly developed from a generic small press digest magazine to a full-blown annual paperback anthology.

There's the same kick against the inherent 'play safe' mentality of the Establishment in horror as there is in speculative fiction, and *Nøctulpa* is one of the journals that *is* willing to handle material considered too extreme, too bizarre or too dangerous by the more conservative and better established markets.

That doesn't mean you're subjected to an overdose of Hutson-style grossout splatter, or a full-frontal glorification of paedophile snuff movies. Rather, the psychological and emotional horror are used not only to frighten you, but to subvert you and confront you, shocking your sensibilities by exposing the primal terror at the core of your very soul with cold, calculating incisions.

From the hip

JOURNAL WIRED #1-2

A5, #1 132pp paperback $7:95, #2 188pp paperback $10 from Journal Wired, P.O. Box 76, Shingletown, CA 96088, USA (#1 £4:95, #2 £6 from the NSFA)

Journal Wired is a magazine that seems to have appeared out of nowhere and taken the market by storm on reputation alone. To judge from the contributors that editors Andy Watson and Mark V. Ziesing have gathered for these first two issues, it has the bite to back up the bark.

The critical articles in the first issue include John Shirley on screenwriting for Hollywood, Lucius Shepard on the passing of cyberpunk and the advent of splatter, and the first of a series by Andy Watson of "ongoing editorial jousting against the hot-air-propelled grist mills of big business". Each one condemns how the commercial obsession with short-term profit has driven out the craftsmanship and inspiration from the arts, but there's only so much you can say about the sad effects of corporate greed (and I plead guilty to having ridden that bandwagon myself).

For the fiction, Rudy Rucker's "Drugs and Live Sex – New York City, 1980" is an alarmingly candid monologue narrative drawn from his autobiographical novel *All the Visions*, due out this year, whilst A.A. Attanasio presents a sweeping Earth-based fantasy of spiritual achievement in "Atlantis Rose". Both pieces are without doubt the high points of the magazine and, together with the Iain M. Banks interview, make it worth wading through the rhetoric elsewhere.

The whole feel of #2 reflects greater self-assurance compared to #1, from the full-colour cover to the drastically increased page-count. In terms of content, their condemnation of the commercial obsession with short-term profit itself verged on hysteria. Now, with the venture boosted by #1's moderate success, they thankfully no longer need to justify their existence by preaching at the reader, offering instead a confident take-it-or-leave-it stance embodied in the editorial's opening gambit.

The overall balance of this issue benefits as a result. In the non-fiction, Andy Watson gets to grips with hard facts at last in his column "The Profit Motive", Lucius Shepard no longer rants but apologises for being human, and Michael Banks offers the first instalment of what looks set to be a fascinating journey into the electronic info-world waiting to be explored at the other end of your modem.

Colin Greenland and Lisa Tuttle interview each other, and fall into the same trap of mutual adulation as Shiner and Waldrop in

SF Eye #5. Pat Cadigan more than makes up for that though, in a marathon conversation that is humorous and interesting enough to make me want to find out more. Idiosyncratic fiction this time comes from Paul Di Filippo, Jonathan Lethem and Lewis Shiner.

Even if their viewpoint is at times overly didactic, editors Watson and Zeising are to be admired for having the conviction to practice what they preach. They avoid graphics and slick gloss as not to "fool, confuse or mislead" the reader, though the interior layout still feels untidy, its intended simplicity not as elegant as that of *Ellipsis*, for example. They also reject all advertising and subscriptions income so as to remain totally independent of external constraints, and make *Journal Wired* available only through bookstores and libraries.

Journal Wired states its case with straight honesty. Its philosophy towards publishing is wholly applaudable and close to the hearts of all small presses and independent houses. But as with all ideologies, just how fully this philosophy can be put into practice is debatable.

To judge from the magazine's success to date and continued evolution, however, it doesn't seem that, even at a hefty £6 a time, the price of true independence is proving too high. ❑

Whereas gore-and-guts horror relies heavily on evoking the senses of sight, touch and smell, psychological horror is based on undermining the reader's assumptions about the perceived world. It forces you to question what you previously took for granted, kicking out the cornerstones of a balanced view of the world to leave former beliefs in doubt and cosy security replaced by anxiety and moral dilemma. This kind of emotional terrorism is far more subtle than a simple slap in the face, more demanding upon the reader, longer lasting and ultimately more satisfying.

George Hatch has accordingly gathered here a selection of writers from across the spectrum, who prod the reader's sensibility with various sticks and electrodes. In Gerard Houarner's "Old Man in Park, With Knife" it's the primal fear that urban man is really a weak and defenseless species; in "Cosmos" by Norman Partridge", it's the unsettling realization that we are secretly being manipulated by those we trust.

In David B. Silva's "The 13th Floor – Room 1327", D.W. Taylor's "Hell is for Children", and Wayne Rile Williams' "Vortex", we are told we have no control over our individual destinies, but are simply pawns in some higher plan, whilst the world is terminally askew in Steve Rasnic Tem's "Strands", David Barker's "Mural" and Jeffrey Osier's "Radio Glossolalia".

All these writers show their skill by taking the stories to the point where the simple answer of 'the guy's going mad' or 'he dreamed it all' is no longer an adequate explanation of what's going on. You have to place complete faith in the author's interpretation of the story, and that's when the subversion and mental terrorism begin.

It's not all a course in psychotic delusion and paranoia induction, however. More straightforward stories come from Ronald Kelly, J.E. Dressler and Mark Rainey, whilst Randy Chandler and t. Winter-Damon offer an except from their collaborative novel *Duet for the Devil*, its Vietnam nightmare completely different in style and approach from the except which appeared in **BBR #13**.

The smooth overall presentation is rounded off by artist John Borkowski, whose full page illustrations for each of the eighteen stories set off the text with their stark visuals and striking use of contrast.

When magazines that actually deliver the goods are so thin on the ground, it's very gratifying to find *Nøctulpa* getting on with the real business of publishing good horror. It's a shame that George Hatch must restrict the magazine to an annual schedule, but then again, like most treats, it's all the sweeter for the waiting. ❑

PANDORA #25

A5, 76pp paperback, $5 from Pandora, 2844 Grayson, Ferndale, MI 48220, USA

From the outside, *Pandora* gives the appearance of sickly sweet unicorns and dragons, the cover a combination of noble stallion, starstruck heroine and sweeping planetoids. Inside, BEM cartoons and a bemused baby dragon with a knot in its tail reinforce initial impressions.

Yet whilst the magazine is pitched towards the fantasy end of the spectrum, it is certainly not designed to pluck the heartstrings of 16-year-old schoolgirls.

The first story, "Turnabout" by Deborah Wheeler, is quick to dispel that myth. If gods are created on the strengths of people's belief in them, then it's no wonder that the dedication and intensity of ballet dancers in performance and practice should spawn their own ethereal presences which in turn guide and inspire them. It's a surprising and clever story, the ending upbeat but controlled.

The trend continues with Carole L. Glickfield's "What Could Be Missing?", where pensioners spin out their closing years playing computerized bingo, and "A Gentle Yarn", Celeste Paul's treatment of childhood revelation and bogeymen. James

". . . I read it with the usual mixture of fascination, admiration, irritation, and exasperation."
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S. Dorr's "Fetuscan" – anti-abortion enforced by police state tyranny – and the sentient android theme of Wade Tarzia's "Last Words from Facility #9" are also worthy of mention.

Most of the stories centre on milestones in a character's development, be it a final decision to defy authority or a sudden realization of their own inadequacies. At times though, this can simply be an author's reliance on a closing pun or hitherto unrevealed fatal miscalculation by the protagonist, so that ultimate enjoyment is rather dependent on readers' individual tastes.

Artwork by Alfred Klosterman, Marge Simon and Michael Kucharski amongst others gives the magazine a nice visual feel. My only qualm is that with so many US magazines using the typesetting facilities readily available through street-corner copyshops – a fact which sets them apart from British magazines and makes it difficult for many UK publications to break into the American market – *Pandora* remains word-processed with titles calligraphied by hand.

Combined with the initial impressions noted earlier, this is unfairly offputting to browsers and does not do proper justice to the wares displayed within. But don't judge a book by the cover, they say, and though *Pandora* won't change your way of life, it'll certainly make you pause a while for an entertaining read. ❑

SFWA BULLETIN Vol 24 #1

A4, 40pp, $4 (4/$16) from Science Fiction Writers of America, PO Box 4236, West Columbia, SC 29169, USA

This issue of *The Bulletin of the Science Fiction Writers of America* is a special issue devoted to the 25th Annual Nebula Awards, and as such is crammed with information about the current nominations and previous winners.

Each of the nominees provides a personal insight into their particular story, which ranges from the highly candid (Howard Waldrop) to the utterly pompous (Orson Scott Card), and is best taken in small doses.

Another unfortunate side effect of being the Nebula special is that every other page is taken up by publishers' adverts, congratulating the authors they've published for being nominees. Much corporate drum-banging and self-congratulation all round, and even Mark Ziesing gets in an ad for publishing Waldrop's "A Dozen Tough Jobs". No doubt the SWFA can afford to savour the moment and polish their laurels, but to the uninitiated it is rather overwhelming.

Eight pages of this issue are devoted to more regular features, and get on with the *Bulletin*'s real job of informing members on matters of professional interest, and offering general advice about practical non-literary aspects of being a writer.

Larry Niven ponders some "Blind Alleys" he's encountered in his years of writing, and offers them up for general edification. More specific and to the point, novelist John Dalmas' "Open Letter to Copy Editors" on how to not to abuse an author's text is essential reading for anyone even remotely associated with publications production. Rounding off this issue is Paul Di Filippo's "Market Report", which amiably brings members up to date with the latest developments and market opportunities at home and overseas. ❑

TRAJECTORIES #5 (Winter 1989)

32pp tabloid newspaper, $2 (4/$6 or 8/$8) from Trajectories Publishing, Box 49249, Austin, TX 78765, USA

It's said that Texas is the place to be for SF these days, and *Trajectories* seems to have its finger pretty well on the pulse of what's going on in downtown Austin.

Local success stories are profiled, such as novelist Elizabeth Moon and fiction magazine *New Pathways*, whilst the most is made of visits to town by notables from out-of-state. Those interviewed include Soviet academic and H.G. Wells biographer Professor Julias Kagarlitski, but the undoubted highlight must be the honest and extremely thought-provoking conversation with Robert Anton Wilson.

Other non-fiction includes John Shirley on the perils of sending plutonium payloads into space, an appraisal of the Houston Grand Opera's production of *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* by Philip Glass and Doris Lessing, and a practical distillation by Mike Gunderloy of all the SF magazines (60 in all!) reviewed in the May 1989 issue of *Factsheet Five*, a valuable resource in itself.

The second half of this issue is comprised of fiction by t. Winter-Damon, Steve Schlich, Floyd Largent, W.S. Wheeler and Richard Renfrew, illustrated by Jean Elizabeth Martin, Alfred Klosterman and Austin-based artist Michael L. Barrett.

Whilst the tabloid format is great for shorter articles, the tendency to very small type in contrast makes the stories rather overwhelming and hard to read in one sitting; no doubt this will improve as the editors get used to the new DTP system. ❑

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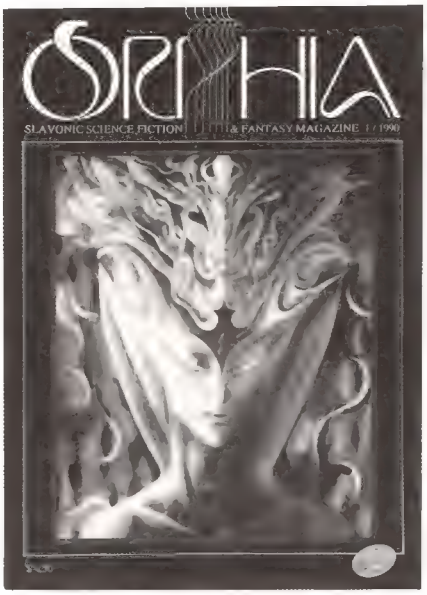
Slavic slant

ORPHIA #1

A5, pp paperback, $4:50 (10/$40) from Orphia, SCC "Computer", 2A D.Polyanov str., 1504 Sofia, Bulgaria (cheques/bank orders should be made payable to WPC - account No. 1305-0.41, BHF Bank, 135 Seerstrasse, 8027 Zurich, Switzerland)



Orphia styles itself as "The World's first and only magazine for Slavonic Science Fiction and Fantasy" and the opening editorial goes on to promise great things: "We, the publishers of *Orphia*, the first ever magazine for Slavonic Sci-Fi in English, are trying to offer you a glimpse of the view from the other side of these horizons and give you the opportunity to peep into the space and time of Slavonic Science Fiction, to see with your own eyes a universe which has challenged our minds and souls for decades. Orphia is a country which does not exist on the map. Its territory is the imagination of millions of Slavs, and its boundaries are open for all who are curious enough to visit it."

This first edition contains two hundred plus glossy pages of the 'best' of SF from all over the Eastern bloc. It is well-produced and packaged, though powerfully reminiscent of the *Readers Digest* format, and contains much that it thought-provoking and interesting, with some great full-colour and monochrome artwork as well.

The high points of this first, and hence no doubt experimental issue include a couple of short pieces from the pen of Karel Capek – "A Resettlement Agency" and "The Man Who Could Fly" – a strange post-holocaust vision of hope, "The Poplar" by Velko Miloev, and a great feature on Bulgarian SF artists. However, ranged against these goodies are some seriously bad pieces, full of the sort of cliché that simply turn me off. One example of this, though unfortunately not the only example, is "The Guard of the Pass" by Svetoslav Loghinov, eighteen laborious pages of swords, sorcery, fantastic machines and parallel worlds. AAAggh.

One other minor complaint has got to be the failure of the translation, which is often confused and faltering, and at worst makes little sense at all.

Orphia is, without a doubt, a great idea, giving us in the West access to what is going on in the Eastern bloc as far as SF and fantasy are concerned, and for that alone I feel the editors of *Orphia* deserve our fullest support, but I think in all fairness that this first issue does little to live up to its great promise, and leaves the reader more disappointed than excited, and has more merit for its novelty than its content. However, I would advise anyone who is even vaguely interested in the Slavic slant on life to buy themselves a copy and perhaps even to take out a subscription. I shall certainly do so, and wish the editors of *Orphia* all the best in the future.

Chris Whitmore ❑

COLLAPS #33

A5, 36pp, available for trade/swap from Gdánski Klub Fantastyki, 80-325 Gdánsk 37 skr.pocz.76, Poland

The GKF continue their activities in Polish fandom with the lastest issue of their magazine *Collaps*. Although completely in Polish, there's some rather good artwork from assorted members of the Studio Komiks Polski, as well as a Moebius strip and a Charles Dougherty illustration first spotted in *Champagne Horror*.

Also mailed with this issue were various other chapbooks, including *Nazgul*, a fanzine with a heavy rock bias, the *Informator* newsletter, and a programme for Polcon '89, the Polish national convention at which Brian Aldiss was Guest of Honour.

Even without the benefit of understanding all the text, non-Polish readers can easily appreciate the interests and enthusiasm of fans in the Eastern bloc. Their keenness to communicate with the international SF community is reflected in regular English-language editions of *Collaps*, making the GKF an excellent starting point for any British fans interested in making contact with overseas organisations. ❑

POUTNÍK

A4, 52pp, available for trade/swap from Egon Cierny, Secretary, Jules Verne SF Club, Matechova 14, 140 00 Prague 4, Czechoslovakia

Poutník (The Pilgrim) was recently brought to my attention by Cyril Simsa, and though this special English-language edition of the Czech fanzine is nearly two years old I understand that copies are probably still available, if another English issue has not already been produced in the meantime.

With a heritage dating back to Wells and Verne and earlier, the existence of SF in Britian and America is largely taken for granted by most people, so that to be confronted with an account of SF fandom in a restricted environment is both enlightening and disturbing.

We learn for example that the Jules Verne SF Club, founded in 1969 and the oldest in the country, "ceased to exist" for a period of time, "since it didn't find either sufficient support or understanding", that Czech fandom survives "in spite of many obstables", and that the production of *Poutník* undergoes "official supervising"; we become aware of the deep-rooted presence and indelible effects of censorship and press surveillance in a totalitarian regime.

In spite of this hardship and the paucity of Western contact, the magazine reveals a cheery face to Czech appreciation of SF. In addition to the revealing article on the origins of Prague fandom by Zdenek Rampas, there is an amusing and intelligent short story collaboration by Carola Biedermannová and Jan Pavlík in which the cast of *Star Trek* team up with Conan the Barbarian, as well as fiction by Ivan Adamovic and Stanislaw Svachoucek, and three short pieces from Václav Vlk. Pavel Nosek offers a profile of popular artist Karel Saudek, who also provides the cover and interior illustrations.

Though the quality of translation is variable, it is still easily readable and at its worst the language is simply quaint or archaic. My only quibble, and a minor one at that, is that the lack of obvious titling and division between articles and stories is at times unnecessarily confusing.

Once again, an excellent starting point for the investigation of SF in the Eastern bloc. ❑

VISIONS Vol IV #2

A4, 76pp, $3:50 (3/$10) from Visions, 409 College Avenue, Ithaca, NY 14850 USA, or £1:95 from Neal Tringham, Astronomy Department, Schuster Lab, Brunswick Street, University of Manchester, Manchester

Of all the magazines featured in this section, *Visions* is probably the most easily obtainable English-language source of grass-roots Eastern bloc SF, though its scope also covers New Zealand, West Germany and the UK and USA.

Specifically designed as a showcase for the work of college students, the magazine is coordinated by a Business Enterprise group at Cornell University, whilst the Russian-language edition is prepared and distributed by a 'Youth Company' called Sovmarket.

Though college status means that most of the contributors are just starting out as writers and artists the content, though greatly varied in topic and style, is of a consistently high quality, proving once again that there's a rich vein of new talent just waiting to be tapped.

Jeff VanderMeer and Ian Brooks are familiar names, though Christopher Ryan (Cornell), Denys Brokenshire (Auckland) and Ellen Calhoun (Colorado) should be mentioned for their particularly haunting stories.

The American edition of *Visions* is planned for launch onto the UK market in August 1990, so by the time you read this you should be able to pick up a copy from most specialist shops and bookstores. ❑

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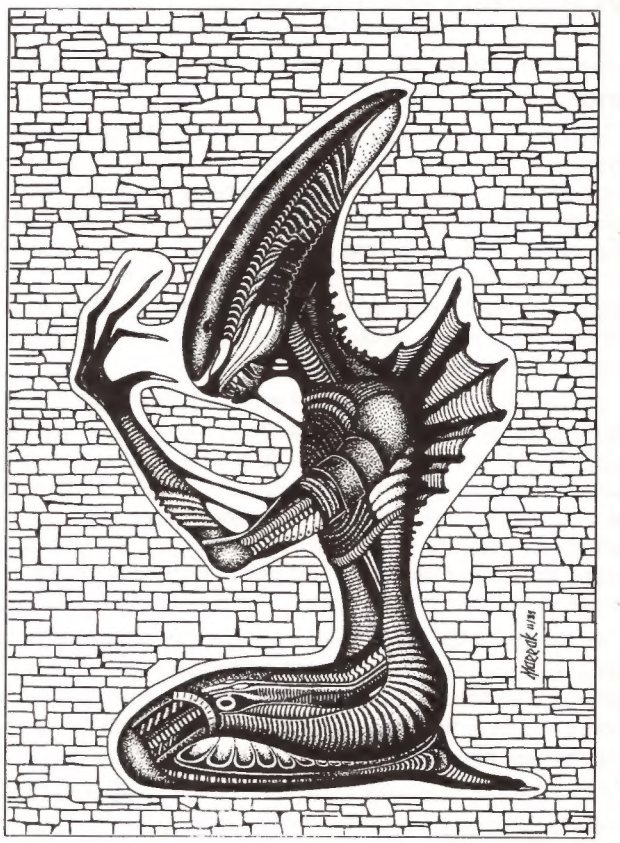

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LETTERS LETTERS LETTERS LETTER

We welcome all comments – good or bad – about *BBR*.
Write to *BBR*, Chris Reed, PO Box 625, Sheffield S1 3GY.
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Double standards

From: **Anthony North, editor *Rattler's Tale*, BCM Keyhole, London WC1N 3XX**

Thanks for the review of my magazine, *Rattler's Tale*. It was an interesting exercise in hypocrisy. Concerning the amount of my own work in the magazine, you say, "... (it) suggests he is either short of contributions or else considers the magazine to be more a vehicle for work of his own unpublished elsewhere." Assuming that you wrote the reviews in **BBR** #15 yourself, this comment comes from an editor who has taken up 11 pages of his own magazine. Take away advertising, info, etc, and that adds up to nearly 30%. Concerning reviews, what are these other than "broad generalisations based on one person's limited experience"?

What about the following? "*Rattler's Tale* probably goes down a storm on the coffee-morning circuit, but in the wider context of speculative fiction publishing it falls rather short of its billing as a voyage of the imagination". Now compare to a statement in your answer to John Duffield's letter: "... it's not for me to challenge his taste, but it certainly doesn't give him leave to glibly dismiss as crap the more ambitious or inventive material that he doesn't like or maybe doesn't understand." I could offer the same argument, suggesting double standards on your part.

As for **BBR** #15, I didn't like it all, but it contained nothing to be insulting about. But I did feel that you set a depressing precedent with your editorial. An editorial should say "read on". And I did – when I woke up. It reminded me of a spoilt child moaning 'cos no one would play with his new toy. Referring back to your review, surely it's better to be half-baked than overdone.

I feel the problem with the form of SF that you and other, similar magazines produce is not the SF itself (I like it, and, at times write it), but the way it's packaged and sold. There are many readers and writers who, given time, would enjoy it, but when offered it immediately in all its glory, they tend to fall back on safety and say, as with anything different, "I don't like that." And another customer is lost forever. A baby doesn't go from the mother's succour to a fillet steak in one easy go. They have to be weened. And though I don't mean this to be a condescending analogy, I do feel new readers need to be nurtured in a similar way. They should be offered the lighter stuff first. And that's where magazines such as *Rattler's Tale* come in. they are a taster of the hard stuff. I don't claim *Rattler's Tale* to be some new, literary concept. It's fun. And it's also the gateway from new readers, to you. Don't knock it that easily.

By the way, can you advise your readers that an SAE will bring a free sample copy? ❑

From: **Dave W. Hughes, Huddersfield**

I think John Duffield is a little out of line with his comments. This 'clique' he mentions ... does this imply that the whole of the NSFA are publishing the same stuff? I'm not really quite sure what he's getting at – his argument seems lost in bitterness. I don't know how anyone can complain about a clique, especially when I have accepted **BBR** and *Auguries* rejections, and yet (not wanting to name names) I have seen a mighty lot of rejections from *Works* appear in other magazines – and they weren't rejected because they were "granny dressed up in her bedroom" or some shite off *Midnight Caller* – how *anyone* can use that programme as an example of entertainment is seriously unhappy.

I read SF, not just write it. I don't really want John or anyone for that matter, telling me that I should be solving problems with my fiction, or thinking about my reading matter and wondering just what sort of answers the author is telling me. And where he mentions that "here are the problems, fight them" I really have to take my hat off to the man. Imagine those two friends of mine who got called up for the Falklands, they eventually didn't have to go 'cos they wrote a story which answered all the world's problems and the whole of the Argentinian army went home – all on an Unwin Hyman Hardback. Brilliant! Maybe stories work rather well with the DHSS and the Taxman but in real life I'm afraid it's not like that.

I would like to ask Mr Tennant where *he* would draw the line with this coherence thing? I'm sure he must realize that what he may find incoherent, others will achieve great benefit. There will *always* be people who stand on different sides of the fence. Like Hakim Bey's story – I didn't like it as a whole, but there were certain sections of it that were pure brilliance – so in that respect it worked – it had an effect. Yet there were people who didn't like it at all. So why can't people just say 'it didn't work' and leave it at that, why do they feel the need to justify why they didn't like something, and why use this excuse to beat other readers into submission that *this* is what you *should* be reading, that stuff is crap – full circle to your editorial?

Finally, I gather that some people may think that I'm against criticism. No, I'm not, but I do detest bitter, sarcastic and generally unhelpful snide remarks that are dressed up as criticism. ❑

From: **Mike Ashley, Chatham**

I'll enter the fray with John Duffield's views. I'm not sure if I'm siding with him or you, since basically you're both saying the same, but looking from opposite directions. I have never been a great fan of dystopic SF. I think SF should be inspiring and uplifting, and encourage that wonder for what's out there. SF has become too depressing, these days, and although there's a place for the SF warning story, I don't generally like it. It can work well as a horror story, as in Robert McCammon's *Swan Song* and Stephen King's *The Stand*, but basically I prefer my SF to be optimistic. I don't want to be depressed when the world out there is already depressing enough. SF is my means of escape, but it can also inspire readers into realizing there is a solution to world problems if only mankind got its act together.

I've never felt British SF was gloomy or depressing. I think American SF, especially in the '70s, was very depressing. Much of the spirit went out of SF, but it's gradually returning, and will return to British SF too. ❑

From: **Mike O'Driscoll, Swansea**

First off, commendations are in order re the revamping of **BBR**; I expect you'll get the odd letter moaning about the new look, but as far as this reader is concerned, the A4 format, the layouts, the artwork and cover gave the magazine a truly professional look which belies its status as a small press

magazine. However, you're hindered by the continuing inclusion of the Godawful "HMS Morpheous" and the only slightly better "Kittens". Dump them fast.

On the fiction side, I can do without D.F. Lewis. Like Nicholas Drage ("Letters", #14) I too have read a lot of Mr Lewis' work and apart from one small piece, "Em", published by yourself, I have not enjoyed any of it. Mark Iles' "The Jailbird" was another piece which did nothing for me. However, the other four stories, and most especially Kilworth's "Truman Capote's Trilby: The Facts" and David Hast's "Crime Watcher", were stunning and among the best fiction you've published to date. Kilworth's story was reminiscent of the work of the late Richard Brautigan, it was touched with the same surreal streak of fatalistic humour and while it may not be 'science fiction' who gives a shit? ❑

From: John Francis Haines, Warrington

Good editorial, with many valid points. At one time I used to borrow quite a lot of SF from the library – now, I would rather subscribe to a magazine than buy a paperback, and it's very rare for me to borrow SF. Definitely better value for money in the magazines – more variety for a start! The true form for the best SF, the short story, has largely been left to the magazines to keep going; and poetry doesn't get a look in outside of the magazines.

While I can sympathise a little with John Duffield, I think you managed to keep a balance in this issue with the humorous "Howard Bolger's Fabulous Space Café" and "Truman Capote's Trilby: The Facts", against the serious, but brilliant "Crime Watcher". These three were, I feel, the best this issue.

While I'm not a fan of strips, "Morpheus" is very good, and the super little daft cartoon "Kittens" is a gem. ❑

From: Seán Feerick, Eltham, London

There seems to be a fair amount of negativity to the more experimental fiction in #15's letters. This is just the sort of conservative attitude that has caused the situation talked about in the earlier article "A Free Market for SF?". Personally, the main reason I subscribe to **BBR** is because I can read prose by the likes of t. Winter-Damon, which certain larger publishers wouldn't have the balls to print until he was a 'name' author. Comments such as "dismal avant-garde crap" are merely vacuous and help nobody. If anything I would like to see more of this sort of writing, and less of the twist in the tale traditional stories that I can read anywhere, should I want to. ❑

From: Nicholas Drage, Rushden

Thank you for **BBR** #15, I am very, very, very impressed, this issue was nothing short of excellent.

"A Free Market for SF?" was very interesting and well written, deep enough to be a good piece but shallow enough to be understood by a relative newcomer to SF magazines like myself.

Thankyou for bringing my attention to *Factsheet Five*, which I should be getting a copy of it from a British company called Counter Productions, can't wait.

I am impressed with you printing John Duffield's letter, to publicly show a view in direct opposition to your own, that is a major display of self-confidence. Then again, in using a letter from somebody who regards *Midnight Caller* as a TV gem you may be accused of setting up a straw man only to blow him down. ❑

From: Chris Hart, Bolton

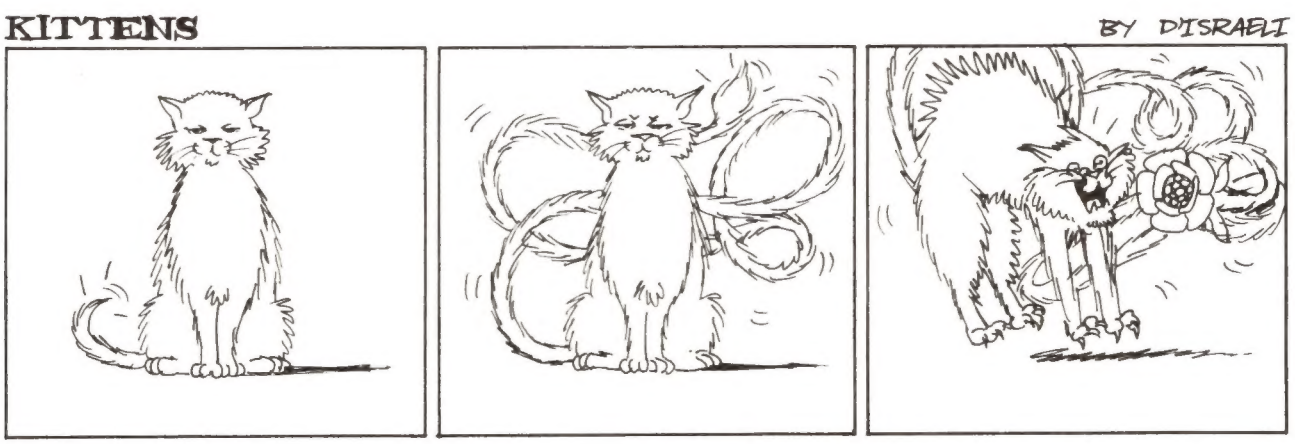
It is pleasing to see **BBR** coming out of the proverbial closet and speaking audaciously about issues. I'm sure that your comments regarding the present state of the publishing industry will resound for some time and hopefully provoke a lively discussion.

The production of #15 is stunning – the large format has made a tremendous improvement and gives justice to Kevin Cullen's strangely beautiful illustrations. With this improvement in appearance, and the forthcoming payment for contributions, **BBR** is sure to woo some fine fiction. I look forward to the future. ❑

From: David Curl, Leeds

John Duffield's letter made interesting reading, and I don't think you replied convincingly to any of his points. According to you, Mr Duffield's opinions are due either to a nostalgia for the so-called 'Golden Age' or to the bitterness of "a writer who's received one rejection slip too many". In rhetoric, that's called *argumentum ad hominem*, and in everyday life it's just called 'personal abuse', but either way it's rather cheap. You also say that if Mr Duffield doesn't like the contents of **BBR** he should take his custom elsewhere. He does have that right, obviously, but it would have been nice to hear you defend your choice of material, or explain what you think **BBR** is for.

I agree with you that SF should be experimental, but when the same experiments are conducted over and over again by a tired, self-perpetuating clique then they start to turn into rituals, irrelevant ones at that. That's the real complaint against much contemporary SF. As for the use of pessimistic scenarios in SF, there's nothing wrong with them as such, but unless the author can think of some totally new form of depressing futility, s/he has to provide some kind of light or goodness in the story, otherwise the characters are just flies crawling around in the muck, and it's difficult to get interested. ❑



all is not as it Seems

(or the second missive)

Action packed, a fraction LACKED
THE ABILITY TO MOVE—
bright and early
MISTY morning
A Stride the shallow groove ■

—ooo—

Kid & Cold War
asleep and dreaming
far away from life
TRAVELS LIGHTLY
NEEDS NO INCISION
Parries the SURGEON'S KNIFE.

—ΔΔΔ—

SLOWLY WAKES and,
SPIRIT WILLING
tries to gain the ground
PICKS UP FEET AND,
ACCIDENTLY,
SKIDS ACROSS TITE GROUND.

—□□□—

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